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LEANING WELL OVER IN THE SADDLE, COWBOY STEVE GRASPED THE STOUT BELT ABOUT IVA'S WAIST.

OR,

THE BOND OF BLOOD.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "VIOLET VANE" SERIES, "CLEAR-GRIT CAL," "SAM SHERIDAN, THE SECRET SERVICE SPECIAL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

RAINBOW RANCH LOSES ITS MASCOT.

"GOING to leave? Did I understand you correctly, Steve Norman?"

"I think you did, sir."

"But—but—I don't understand it! What do you want to leave for?"

"I have very good reasons."

"Name them."

"I am sure you will pardon me if I decline,

Mr. Milton. I will say, however, it is *not* on account of any ill-treatment I have received at Rainbow Ranch. I have nothing but the kindest feelings for you and for all who have befriended me here."

Warren Milton, the owner of Rainbow Ranch, surveyed the young cowboy from head to feet.

"Again I must say I do not understand it," declared the rancher. "I can see no good reason why you should leave. On the contrary, there are the best of reasons why you should remain. You scarcely look like the pitiful wreck who came here two years ago. You were then, apparently, in the last stages of consumption, and we took you in—"

"Don't think I fail to appreciate that!" hastily cut in the young cattleman. "I can never forget all that you have done for me; I shall ever remember your kindness and that of—Iva."

"Yes, my daughter nursed you like you were her own brother."

"She saved my life, God bless her!" fervently.

"I haven't a doubt of it, Norman. She gave you the name of 'the Ranch Mascot,' for she declared you brought us good luck. I confess I was in a hard hole at the time of your appearance, and my fortune changed almost immediately. Ever since you have been with us, fortune has smiled on Rainbow Ranch. I am not superstitious, but Iva's repeated declarations that you *are* a mascot have made an impression on me. Is it more than natural that I do *not* wish to lose you?"

For a moment the young cowboy was silent, as if pondering on the words he should speak.

He was a handsome fellow, five feet ten, square-shouldered and straight as an Indian. He was not more than twenty-two or three years of age, but he was the picture of perfect manhood. In his cheeks was the flush of health, and it did not seem possible he had ever been ill a day in his life.

And Cowboy Steve as he was called—Silver Spur Steve—was a person to command admiration. His plain cowboy garments fitted him unusually well. The heels of his boots were adorned by silver spurs—for which reason the young man had won his *sobriquet* of Silver Spur Steve, in all that wide expanse of ranch and range.

Over young Norman there hovered an air of mystery, for he persistently avoided speaking of his past life. No one on Rainbow Ranch knew anything of him previous to his appearance there as a hopeless invalid.

Warren Milton, the ranch-owner, looked more like a successful Eastern business man than a ranchman, and, in fact, the greater part of his money had been acquired in the East. He was about fifty years of age, slightly cynical and rather cold-blooded.

Milton's business traits so clung to him that he had caused a private office to be constructed in a small room of the ranch building, and there he could be found at his desk two hours every day.

Far and wide he was known as "the Tenderfoot Rancher," and as his early ventures in the cattle business had proved very disastrous through his lack of knowledge, the term seemed highly appropriate.

It was just when ruin stared him in the face that Stephen Norman appeared, and singularly enough at that point Milton's fortune changed, and it had flowed in his favor ever since.

Iva, the rancher's handsome dark-eyed daughter, firmly declared Steve was a mascot, and within her innocent little heart she devoutly believed he had brought them good luck.

"You must see I regret leaving you, Mr. Milton," the young cowboy finally said, his eyes meeting the cold orbs of the ranchman. "It is not from choice, but—"

"If you stay—"

"I cannot!"

"How much per month must I add to your salary?"

Steve fell back a step, new color mounting to his face. Then he put out a shapely hand appealingly.

"Can it be you really thought *that* of me?" demanded the Ranch Mascot. "As if, after all you and Iva have done for me, I would attempt to work you in such a manner! It is not possible you imagined such a thing!"

"I couldn't seem to think of anything else," the ranch-owner asserted.

"If that were true, I would be a most ungrateful wretch."

"I have found very little gratitude in the world. Those whom one befriends the oftenest are the most liable to forget the favors done them."

"I assure you, I am not of that stamp. I hope the time will come when I can convince you I speak the truth."

"You might give me your reason for leaving."

"Strange as it may seem to you, that is impossible."

"Oh, very well," came frigidly from the rancher's lips. "It is not customary for me to allow any of my men to know I wish to retain them. I should have treated you like the others. You have no reason to expect more consideration."

Steve drew himself up proudly.

"I do not expect more, and I have never given you reason to think so."

The lines on Milton's face deepened a trifle.

"I think you have been paid in full for all services?"

"Yes."

"Your resignation is accepted. Good-day!"

For a moment, the young cowboy hesitated, making a slight move as if to hold out his hand.

Then he turned away, shaking his head.

"Good-day, sir!"

The office door closed, and Silver Spur Steve was gone.

"I will get away as soon as possible," muttered the young cowboy, as he hurried toward his room. "I must not see Julia Ruthven again—nor Iva."

But, Iva was descending the stairs, and they came face to face.

She was very pretty and not over eighteen.

"I have just been up to see Dick Clark," she said. "Poor Dick has been very sick, but he is better now. Why, how strange you look, Steve!"

He had not intended to tell her, he had thought of leaving a note to her, but now the words forced themselves from his lips.

"Will you say good-by to Dick for me?"

She fell back.

"Good-by?" she exclaimed. "Why—why, what—"

"I am going away."

"Going away. For how long?"

"Forever!"

All the color left her face.

"You cannot mean that!" she whispered, a choking sound in her voice. "Why should you go away? This is your home? Only last week you told me you had no other."

"Many things may happen in a week. Your father—"

"Oh, has he done this? I will go to him! He shall *not* turn you away! If he does, I'll—I'll leave, too!"

Those words touched him deeply.

"Your friendship is dearer than all else in the world to me, Iva," he asserted, his voice trembling with earnestness and feeling. "Your father has not discharged me; I gave up my position."

"What could make you do such a crazy thing?" she cried. "You *shall* not leave! I won't let you go! Why, you are the best friend I have in the world, except father—"

"And Julia?"

"You come before Julia, Steve."

Then she clasped his arm with both her hands, adding:

"You *shall* stay!"

He forced a smile.

"You do not understand," he said. "I would stay if I could, but, it is impossible. I must go at once."

"But—but—but Julia," she faltered, groping for some excuse to detain him. "You have not said good-by to Julia."

"Where is she?"

"She has gone out for a ride."

Had he spoken the feeling within his heart the expression would have been one of relief and thankfulness.

"I cannot wait for her to return. You must express my regrets, Miss Milton."

"Miss Milton! Yesterday you called me Iva."

"Which was presuming."

"Which was nothing of the kind! Don't I call you Steve? Rainbow Ranch cannot afford to lose its Mascot. You brought us good luck, and—"

"Is *that* the reason you wish me to remain?"

"No, no, no! You *know* it is not! Once, not so very long ago, you spoke to me of—of—loving somebody."

Her voice had sunk very low and her eyes were drooping, but she still clung to his arm.

Within his breast the young cowboy's heart gave a great leap.

"Yes," he answered; "but that person is so far—so very far above me! I was foolish—mad!"

"Nonsense! That's all stuff! You said you dared not tell this person of your love."

"True."

"That's where you're a silly fellow. A chap who doesn't have pluck enough to tell a girl he loves her isn't a brave heart. I advise you to brace up and—"

"It is not a case of courage—don't think that. There are other reasons."

"If the girl loves you, she'll have you for all of the other reasons."

"Oh, Iva, Iva! You *must* know the truth! There is only one girl in the wide, wide world, so far as I am concerned."

At this moment a new thought struck her—a thought that drove the blood from her cheeks.

Why was he so anxious to get away from Rainbow Ranch since her friend, Julia Ruthven, had arrived?

It had been a surprise to Iva when Steve and Julia met and recognized each other. They had known each other in the past, but all the questions of the rancher's daughter had failed to draw the story from Julia's lips.

"He loves her!"

That was the thought which robbed Iva of her strength and silenced her tongue.

Suddenly the young cowboy lifted one of her hands to his lips. As he did so, a quick step sounded close at hand, and they were confronted by Warren Milton.

The ranchman was pale with passion.

"So *this* is the way the land lays!" he said, holding himself in check. "I now understand there is a very good reason why you should leave Rainbow Ranch, young man. The sooner you go, the better. Iva, come to me."

Rather rudely, he drew his daughter from the Ranch Mascot's side.

Steve bowed, retaining his self-possession.

"I only ask to secure some little trinkets from my room," he said; "then I will go."

Twenty minutes later he was riding to the southwest, Rainbow Ranch at his back.

CHAPTER II.

THE ASHES OF A DEAD LOVE.

"So ends another sweet dream!" muttered the young cowboy. "Dear little Iva! I'll never see her again!"

Once or twice he looked back at the familiar outlines of the ranch. It seemed like home to him, and he felt that he was leaving it forever.

Suddenly he espied a saddled horse galloping wildly over the plain, its bridle-rein swinging loose.

"What is the meaning of that?" he asked himself, as he wheeled his own animal to cut the other off. "The creature has broken away from some one, and—it's Iva's horse!"

As he approached the animal, he discovered the saddle upon its back was Iva's. At first, he could not understand it, for he was sure he had left the girl at the ranch. Then a sudden thought revealed the truth to him.

"Iva must have let Julia have her horse. Something has happened to Julia Ruthven."

The animal seemed blind with fright, and Steve was obliged to use his rope in securing it.

"She has been thrown from the saddle," he decided. "I wonder if she is severely injured."

He had hoped to escape meeting her again, but he could not go on his way without learning what fate had befallen her. Perhaps she was in danger and need of aid.

Having quieted the frightened horse, he attempted to follow back along the trail the animal had left. This was not difficult, but it proved unnecessary.

The distant report of a pistol reached his ears, coming, it seemed, from a little knot of timber directly in his path.

"I believe there is trouble there," he muttered, lightly touching his horse with the spur.

He was taking Iva's animal along, the creature having recovered from its terror.

Straight toward the little patch of timber he dashed, making sure his revolvers were ready for instant use.

A second shot came to his ears, and he heard a faint cry for help.

There was no longer any doubt about it; Julia was in trouble of some kind.

Into the grove plunged the two horses, only to be suddenly flung upon their haunches by a pull at the bit and the leading-rope.

Before him Cowboy Steve beheld an unusual sight.

Clinging in the lower branches of a small tree was a decidedly beautiful girl, on whose face was a look of terror. She held a small 22-caliber revolver in her hand, but she was so frightened, apparently, that she could not have

used the weapon effectually had it been a most deadly "bulldog."

Pawing up the ground at the foot of the tree was a fiery-eyed black bull. Now and then the bull would rattle its outspread horns against the bark of the tree, or butt it so fiercely it seemed as if the girl would be shaken from her perch.

The imperiled maiden saw Steve, and uttered a cry of warning.

"Look out! The creature is mad! Kill the nasty beast, or it will shake me down on those horns!"

It took but a glance to convince the cowboy that the bull was indeed mad, for he had dealt with many such animals, on the range. He knew there was but one way to cure them, and one of his long-barreled revolvers left its holster for a place in his hand.

The bull saw the new-comer and turned on him, its eyes glowing like two huge coals, every hair on its body seeming to stand out like a bristle. Shaking its hard head, the creature gave a wild snort that caused both horses to rear and shy. Then the led animal, once more overcome by fear, wheeled and broke away.

A few cool words calmed the young cowboy's own horse.

"Oh, do hurry and shoot the beast!" cried the girl in the tree. "I'm afraid I'm going to faint!"

"Little danger of that!" muttered Steve, between his teeth. "I know you of old, my dear woman."

He reined his horse to the right, watching a chance to send his first bullet where it would be effective. To his disgust, the bull turned with him, keeping head on.

"Just stand still a moment or two, old fellow!" urged the Ranch Mascot. "How do you expect me to shoot you when you won't give me a show at a fatal spot?"

The mad bull did not wait, and suddenly charged the cowboy.

Steve had been watching for such a move, but was barely able to avoid the bull.

As the animal went plunging past, the cowboy's revolver spoke. He knew the shot would not prove effective the instant he pulled the trigger, and an exclamation of disappointment left his lips.

Reining about, he was in time to see the bull turn and charge back.

He did not wait for the animal to pass, but fired straight at one of those gleaming eyes.

Again avoiding the charge, he saw his second bullet had not been wasted. A third shot cut out the other eye, and the mad bull was blinded!

Then Cowboy Steve deliberately dismounted and approached the animal. A bullet back of the left shoulder completed the work. The bull sunk on its knees; then rolled slowly over on its side.

"Bravo, bravo!" cried a musical voice from the tree. "That's the way to do it! Why, I banged away at the beast six times, and I don't think I touched it at all."

Not until he was sure that his final shot had finished the work did Steve Norman turn toward the girl he had saved. Then he gracefully lifted his hat and bowed, but there was not a trace of a smile on his calm face.

"How am I to get down?" questioned the girl. "I had very little trouble about getting up. That beautiful beast assisted me."

"I think I will be able to assist you down without trouble," answered the young cattleman. "I will lead my horse under the tree, and you can swing down to its back."

Which he did, and, in a few moments, the girl was safely on the ground.

"Oh, I thank you awfully much!" she cried, gushingly. "I know I should have been killed if you hadn't come to my rescue. That horrid creature frightened my horse, and I was unceremoniously dumped from the saddle. For a wonder, the fall did not hurt me one bit. Just how I came up in this tree I'll never tell."

"You have evidently had a narrow escape from death, Miss Kenton," he calmly said.

"And I am so glad it was you who saved me! It seems as if fate brought us together again, Steve."

"An adverse fate."

"Don't speak like that!" she entreated.

She put out an appealing hand to him, touching him on the arm, but he recoiled quickly.

"I beg of you, Miss Kenton—your pardon—Miss Ruthven."

"Steve, you are changed."

"And you—even your name is changed."

"You speak harshly."

"Why shouldn't I? And still—why should I? What more could I expect than the treatment I received."

"You have not forgotten?"

"Did you think I could forget so easily? I was nothing but a boy, and you—well, if not much older in years, you were far older in experience. Bah! Why am I speaking of that! It brings a bitter taste to my mouth!"

"Oh, come, Steve!" she entreated, holding out her gloved hands. "That is all in the past. It is dead—"

"So is my regard for you."

"You loved me once."

"I thought so."

"You did—I know you did!"

"If so, that love is dead. Why stir its ashes?"

"As you say, you were only a boy, and I—"

"You were years older, although you looked then, as you appear now, like a girl of eighteen. How you retain your youth is a mystery to me."

"I am not so very old," she half-laughed.

"Why, Steve, I'm only twenty-seven!"

"No one would dream you had seen twenty."

"So much the better. You are a man now—fully old enough to vote. There are not so many years between us—not enough to keep us apart."

"It is not the years that separates us. I know you for what you are. How under heaven did you ever come to know and be friendly with Iva Milton?"

"I met her at boarding-school."

"Impossible! Why should you be at such a place?"

"Business."

"You were looking for victims?"

"Oh, that does not sound at all pleasant! I entered the school for the purpose of getting acquainted with girls whom I could use to advantage."

"There was a black look on the face of the young cowboy."

"And Iva was one of them?"

She laughed.

"Don't get worked up, old fellow. Warren Milton is rich. Why shouldn't I—"

"And I am going away—going to leave her to your mercy! You would ruin her in some way!"

A look of surprise filled the girl's blue eyes.

"Going away? When?"

"Now."

"Why?"

"Because I cannot remain where you are."

"Which is the same as a confession you still care for me."

"Which is nothing of the kind. I swear all my regard for you is dead and cold! But I feared I would betray myself if I remained—I knew I would call you by the name you bore in the East."

"And was it for me you cared so very much? Did you not think of yourself at all?"

Steve's face flushed a bit.

"I confess I did not care to have you make public my past."

"I thought as much. We are both in the same box."

"No! All my old life is put behind me. I confess I gambled and drank. It was those vices which brought me close to death. You deserted me—left me to die. I did not die. I tried to follow you and Bartley Frick. My strength failed me. They said I was dying of consumption. I was taken in at Rainbow Ranch, and Iva—dear little Iva!—nursed me back to life and health."

The color had fled from the face of the listening girl and her hands were clinched.

"Iva!" she whispered. "I see—I understand—you love her!"

"If so, the more fool I! I remember my record, what I have been and what I am, and I do not dream of ever possessing her."

"I would kill her, if I thought there was danger you would win her!" hoarsely declared the girl.

He looked at her in surprise.

"Can you be in earnest?" exclaimed the cowboy. "One would think you really cared for me now."

"Care for you! Oh! Steve! you have grown so strong and handsome. I did think I had ceased to love you, but now I know I love you more madly than ever before! Won't you believe me, Steve? Take me back! We will go away from here—somewhere—anywhere! I will be only too glad to give up my present life, for I am heartily sick of it. Together, where we are not known, we will begin all over again. Think, Steve, think what it means! I love you truly, with all my heart! You must believe!"

His reply was a laugh of scorn.

CHAPTER III.

LOVE OR HATRED?

THAT laugh cut to her very heart. She fell back, lifting one hand to her eyes, extending the other appealingly.

"Don't!" she gasped—"please don't!"

"I know you pretty well," asserted Silver Spur Steve; "but I cannot always tell when you are acting and when you are in earnest."

"Oh, Heaven! you are cruel!"

"Cruel! What of yourself? I have not forgotten how you took my last dollar and left me alone to die!"

"Oh, can't you forgive? I was mad! I confess I wronged you—I confess everything—only forgive!"

"I cannot. You ask too much. I have tried to forget, but I found that impossible. What were you when I first met you? An adventurer—a blackmailer! With your sweet, innocent face and your seductive ways, you led your victims into the traps you set. They were usually middle-aged men, called respectable. You always chose those who had wives and families. When your web was well spun, you demanded hush-money."

"And usually received it," she said, with a touch of swagger. "I played them well. I obtained their money, and in return they obtained—nothing at all. I was much too sharp to ever let one of them entrap me."

"You forget, Julia. There was one. He had you foul, and he meant to bring the matter to court. You would have been sent up. Who saved you?"

"You did, Steve."

"I had money then, for the night before I had broken a faro-bank. I saw you arrested. Fool that I was, I was struck by your face, and I put up my last dollar to save you."

"And succeeded."

"Which I have since then bitterly regretted. It would have been better for me had I failed. You rewarded me with your smiles for a time. When I was down on my back, you took my money and fled with Frick, a worthless actor."

"I have confessed I wronged you. I did so in a moment of weakness. Now I am ready to do anything to win you back."

"For what purpose? You might remain true for a time, were I fool enough to believe you, but you would finally tire of me. What then? It would be the same old story."

"No, no; I swear—"

"I wouldn't trust you, even though I believed you in earnest at this moment. There is apparently nothing but frankness and honesty in your eyes, but they are as treacherous as your heart."

She suddenly faced him, throwing back her head defiantly.

"Be careful!" she cried. "Do you wish to make me your bitterest foe?"

"I choose your enmity to your friendship."

"I may make a stronger foe than you dream."

He flung out one hand.

"That is nothing."

"I will strike you in a way that will cut the deepest."

"Your threats are music."

"I will tell those who have trusted you all about your past—I will tell her!"

"Even that will not harm me, for I am going far away, into some remote part of the country. I shall change my name. You will waste your breath in telling the stories."

"But Iva—I promise you she shall not escape."

In a moment he comprehended her meaning. With one long stride he was close to her, his hand falling with an iron grip on her wrist.

"Iva!" he grated. "Would you harm that innocent child? You would! I read the intention in your face."

"I would," she retorted, defiantly, "for now I know you love her."

"But you shall not! I will not leave you the opportunity! She shall not become your victim, for she shall know the truth concerning you. Ha! You did not dream two could play at the game of exposure!"

She was trembling now, but not with fear. Anger had taken full possession of her.

"Oh, how I hate you!" she cried.

That made him laugh in her face once more.

"A little while ago you were telling of your love; now it is hatred. I knew it would turn quickly. Oh, I was not fool enough to trust you again!"

She sought to twist herself from his grasp, and, failing to do so, she struck him in the face with her clinched left hand. And still he smiled! Nothing could have hurt her more.

"You have become a perfect devil!" panted the maddened girl.

"I have simply learned my lesson well. I am no longer a soft and foolish boy. I know you thoroughly, Julia Kenton, or Ruthven, as you now call yourself. I will baffle you in your purpose, for Iva shall know the full truth. I cannot go back there, but if you remain under the roof of Rainbow Ranch until to-morrow, you will be cast out by its owner. I shall send him your full history, carefully written out."

"Do so! I will take my chances. A few moments ago I was ready to turn from the old life to a better one; but you killed my ambition to do so. Whatever I become, you will be responsible."

"You know that is not true, Julia. The seeds of sin were sown within your heart long before I met you. You are a natural adventurer, and any other life lacks attraction for you. No matter what comes, I shall not hold myself responsible in the least."

A hard look had blotted out much of the soft beauty of her face, and her hand was now concealed in her bosom.

"Steve."

"What?"

"I am going to make one more appeal."

"It is useless."

"It is the last. I swear I love you better than anything else on this earth!"

"Another change!"

"Never was I more in earnest. Won't you forget this black-eyed girl who has fascinated you and go away with me? We will be so happy together! Please do this, darling!"

There was a world of tenderness in the appeal, but he had steeled himself to meet her advances as he believed they deserved.

"No, Julia."

"For the last time—"

"For the last time No!"

"Then die!"

Out came her hand from her bosom and the little revolver was thrust almost against his forehead. The hammer fell with a dull click, but there was no report.

For one moment, she seemed dazed, then she dropped the weapon to the ground.

"It is empty!" she gasped. "I had forgotten!"

"You really meant to kill me?"

"Yes."

"And then—"

"And then myself. They would have found us here dead together."

"You are more desperate than I dreamed. You failed in your purpose, and now I will leave you."

"Yes, go!"

"Remember what I have told you. Leave Rainbow Ranch to-day, if you would save yourself the disgrace and humiliation of ejection."

"Go!"

He bowed, swung lightly into the saddle and rode away.

She watched his retreating figure.

"Oh, Heaven!" she panted, her hands pressed together over her throbbing heart. "How I love him! how I love him! He has become so grand, so fearless, so handsome! I would give my very soul to possess him as I did once! And now he scorns me!"

"Won't he look back? Oh, if he would only look back!"

But he rode on without turning his head.

She staggered to the edge of the grove and stood clinging to a branch, watching him till he was a mere speck in the distance.

Then she fell face downward on the ground and lay there like one dead.

CHAPTER IV.

FOUL WORK—ON THE TRAIL.

"Oh, father! you were cruel!"

"Hush, child!" commanded Warren Milton, rather sternly. "I saw enough to give me good reason for doing as I did."

"Stephen Norman is honest and manly."

"He is not a fit associate for you, Iva. He is a person who veils his past in mystery. We know nothing of him before he came here."

"But Julia knows. She will tell me."

"No matter. He is gone, and I am glad of it."

The rancher left his child alone, and she fled to her room, where she burst into tears.

"He is gone!" she sobbed, flinging herself face downward on her bed. "I will never see him again! And I—I—thought perhaps he loved me—some! He didn't care for me a bit! It was Julia! I hate Julia!"

But when her first paroxysms of grief were past, she added:

"I hadn't ought to hate Julia. She is not to blame. She is fortunate. I don't hate her. I wonder if she cares for him?"

She lay thinking it all over for a long time.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the ranch. She heard loud voices calling and the rush of heavy feet. Then somebody cried:

"It's murder!"

She sprang up and listened.

What had happened?

She opened her door and stepped out, being just in time to come face to face with Big Ben, the foreman.

"What is it, Ben?" she asked. "What is all this excitement about?"

"Dick Clark has croaked."

"Dick?"

"Yes; he's gone."

"Why, he was much better not so very long ago. It is not possible!"

Just then Warren Milton appeared.

"Iva, child," he said, "stay in your room for a little time."

"But, father, tell me—"

"You shall know all in good time. Please go into your room now."

She was dazed somewhat, and he had little trouble in inducing her to obey him.

When the door closed upon her, he turned to Big Ben, drawing the foreman away.

"Is it true?" the rancher cautiously asked.

"Dick—"

"Has been knifed," nodded the cowboy.

"Who did it?"

"Come to his room."

Milton followed Big Ben. There were several cowboys in the room where poor Dick Clark had been kindly cared for during his sickness, and the cowboy's rigid body was stretched across the bed.

A glance showed he was stone dead.

On the floor lay the bloody knife that had ended the unfortunate cowboy's career.

"I wouldn't let any one touch it till you saw it, senor," said Yellow Jack, a rather intelligent and handsome-appearing fellow who claimed there was Spanish blood in his veins.

The rancher picked up the knife and examined it. His face paled, and he cried:

"My God!"

"You know the knife, senor?" hinted Yellow Jack.

"Know it—yes. But it is impossible the owner of this blade killed Dick Clark! They were the best of friends."

"What is this on the sheet?" exclaimed one of the throng. "See here! Poor Dick tried to write something with his own blood!"

All crowded eagerly forward.

It was plainly evident the dead man had made an attempt to trace something on the sheet. The forefinger of his right hand had been dipped in blood, and his failing strength had, it seemed, enabled him to trace five irregular letters. They were—

"Steve."

"Whose knife is that thar?" hoarsely cried Big Ben, pointing at the bloody blade Warren Milton held in his trembling hand.

"It is Stephen Norman's!" was the low reply.

"Whar is Steve Norman?" cried several voices.

"He is gone."

"Gone whar?"

"Left the ranch."

"How long ago?"

"Nearly two hours."

"Poor Dick's been dead about two hours."

"But Senor Norman never did this!" asserted Yellow Jack. "I am sure—"

"No, no!" chimed in several voices. "This is not Steve's work!"

Big Ben shook his head.

"I won't believe it of the lad till I hev ter," asserted the big fellow; "but these yar things do look powerful bad ag'in' him."

"That's what they do!"

"Do you remember Dick hed a row with Steve jest afore he wuz taken down?" questioned one of the cowboys.

"They made that all up," declared another.

"They 'peared to, but Silver Spur may hev held a grudge."

"He wasn't that kind."

"He didn't 'pear ter be, but—"

"Whar's he gone, boss? We've gotter foller him an' bring him back hyar."

"I don't know whar he has gone," replied the rancher. "All I know is that he suddenly resigned and left without delay. He rode away on his own horse, taking everything that belonged to him."

"I saw him riding to to the southwest, said Yellow Jack."

"We must trail him."

"Yes, trail him! trail him!"

"Yes," said Warren Milton, with sudden firmness. "If he did this red work, he should be brought to justice as speedily as possible. Big Ben, I select you to choose three companions and pursue Stephen Norman, capture him and bring him back to Rainbow Ranch. He shall be given a square and fair show. If he can prove his innocence, well and good; if not—"

He ceased abruptly, but one of the cowboys made a significant sound in his throat—like that of a person strangling. It caused the rancher's blood to run cold in his veins.

There was little delay. Having been chosen as a leader of the trailers, Big Ben quickly selected his companions.

"The sooner we are off the better," said the foreman. "He has a good start of us, and, if he really killed Dick Clark, he will make the best of it."

The excitement on the ranch was intense when the full truth became known, but the cowboys were reluctant about believing their pard, Silver Spur, guilty of so foul an act. In fact, many of them firmly declared nothing would convince them their late comrade had murdered the man he so often called friend.

"It remains for him ter prove his innercence," grinsly averred Big Ben. "Ther lad hain't hed a better friend nor w'at I've bin, but it looks black ag'in' him. Ef he wiped out poor Dick, I'll like nuthin' better'n pullin on the rope that swings him."

Ben's three companion trailers were Yellow Jack and two cowboys named Grant and Rogers. It did not take them long to prepare for the start. Jack had seen Steve riding to the southwest, so little time was lost in striking the trail.

The excitement at Rainbow Ranch had been so intense that the absence of Julia, now unnaturally protracted, had scarcely produced comment.

In the little grove where Steve had met Julia Ruthven the trailers found the dead bull. Iva's horse was quietly feeding near the grove and was secured by Big Ben.

"Somethin's happened ter t'other gal," declared the foreman. "This shows it purty plain. Jest w'at all ther sign means I hain't got time ter diskiver, fer time is might precious jest now."

But at the southern extremity of the grove they came upon Julia. She heard their approach and sat up, staring at them rather wildly, a strange look in her big blue eyes.

The cattlemen immediately lifted their hats in a most respectful manner, Big Ben acting as spokesman. The foreman questioned her concerning what had happened, but she seemed rather hazy, as if partially stunned.

"Suddenly she started up, crying:

"Steve Norman—where is he?"

"That's jest w'at we'd like ter know," declared the big cowboy.

"What has he done?"

"Enough to hang him," asserted Jim Grant.

The girl insisted on knowing what had happened, and they finally told her. Something like a look of joy passed over her face, and she cried:

"So he is a fugitive from justice! That is good news! He is a villain, and ought to be punished! He shall not escape! No, he shall not, for I will turn trailer myself! Gentlemen, I am going with you!"

In vain they remonstrated and protested. She insisted on becoming one of Silver Spur's pursuers, and they were finally forced to consent.

Within her heart she exclaimed:

"He shall owe his life to me! I will save him from the avengers of blood! Will he scorn me then?"

CHAPTER V.

ODD OLD DOCTOR DIRK.

"We may not overtake ther galoot afore night, miss," said Big Ben.

"I do not care for that," asserted Julia.

"But ther people back at ther ranch 'll think ye're done fer."

"I had not thought of that."

"You see it hain't possible fer us ter take ye along, miss."

"I do not see anything of the kind. This Stephen Norman is my bitterest enemy, and I propose to aid in his capture."

"Will you hear that!" softly exclaimed Jim Grant, leaning toward Bud Rogers and speaking so guardedly his words did not reach the girl's ears. "Any one'd think she wuz a man, 'stead of a little snip of a gal that's soft as

milk. "W'at kin she do 'bout capterin' Steve Norman?"

"She c'd capter him with a smile," nodded Rogers. "Leastwise, she'd oughter be able ter. She's purty as any wax babby."

The girl still refused to return to Rainbow Ranch, and big Ben was forced to send Jim Grant back to let Warren Milton know what had become of her. Grant was instructed to make haste, having notified Milton, and overtake the party.

Once more they moved forward on the trail, which Silver Spur Steve had taken no pains to conceal.

"Don't look like the feller was 'spectin' to be follered very soon," observed Big Ben.

Yellow Jack was strangely silent. Several times he was seen to steal covetous glances at Julia Ruthven, but the girl appeared utterly unconscious of scrutiny.

Steadily the trail led to the southwest.

"He's headin' fer the Blue Hills," said Bud Rogers. "Ef he gits thar—"

The girl turned on him, like a flash.

"What if he gets there?" she asked, eagerly.

"Thar are lots of places ter hide in ther Blue Hills."

"But he must not escape!" exclaimed Julia.

Three hours passed before Jim Grant joined the party again. He had changed horses at the ranch, having overdriven the first animal.

"They're mighty worked up at w'at ye'r doin', miss," Grant said. "They say ye must be plum daft."

The strange girl smiled, but made no reply.

The Blue Hills were rising before them, seeming not more than ten miles away, although they were really twenty. Half the distance to the hills had been covered when Big Ben discovered a horse and rider away in advance.

"It's Steve Norman!" shouted Jim Grant, when the figures were pointed out to him.

"Ef he don't see us, we kin catch him afore he gits inter ther hills," put in Rogers.

"Come on!" cried the beautiful Amazon, at once taking the lead.

But, when they were closer upon the lone horseman, they discovered it was not the Ranch Mascot at all. In a short time they overtook the rider, finding he was a stranger, a man apparently sixty years old. His hair and beard were very gray and he wore gold-rimmed spectacles, as if his eyesight troubled him to some extent. At his left side was a small sachel, supported by a strap which passed over his right shoulder.

The stranger drew rein as soon as he discovered them, and waited for the little party to approach. He lifted his hat to Julia and bowed to the others.

"Good-day, good-day," he cried, cheerily. "A fine day for a dash over the prairie. Whither bound, my friends?"

"To ther hills," was Big Ben's reply, as he suspiciously inspected the stranger. "I don't seem ter know you. Who might ye be, pard?"

"I wish you wouldn't put the question in that form," laughed the little man. "It tempts me to spring a chestnut to the effect that I might be the President, but am not. Will you be good enough to ask me point blank who I am?"

"Anything to accomodate," growled the big cattleman. "Who ther howlin' blue blazes be yer?"

"That is better—much better, even though your language is rather forcible. I'm one of those direct kind of men—always come to the point at once, you see."

"Can't say I do."

"You mean you won't say you do. You could say so, if you chose, although you might not tell the truth. There is nothing like being precise in these little matters of speech. Precision is a jewel, and—"

"Chain up right thar!" exclaimed Ben.

"You're jumpin' from ther point."

"Like the boy who sits down on an inverted tack, eh?" grinned the stranger. "That is another chestnut. It's remarkable how many stale jokes there are afloat in the world. Did you ever stop to think—"

"Holy smoke! You give me pains, old man! I'm fishin' arter your name."

"I used to go fishing myself, when I was a boy. It's really great sport, isn't it. Especially when you catch a licking. If I didn't catch any fish, I could always depend on catching a licking when I got home, so I was not euchered. Now—"

"Now, will you give us that name?"

"Really, I fear that is impossible. It was given me when I was very young, and I have kept it ever since. You must have one of your own, and so you can't actually need another."

The big cattleman saw the stranger's eyes twinkling behind the spectacles, and Ben knew he was being made sport of. This aroused his anger, and he suddenly whipped out a revolver, thrusting it under the nose of the queer little man.

"It's allus danger'us ter be too funny," declared Ben, grimly. "Mister, you're too funny fer this life. I reckon I'll jest hev ter shoot ye on ther spot."

"Will you kindly be a bit more definite as to the locality in which you mean to shoot me? The spot may mean any spot. Now if I am going to be shot, I wouldn't mind—I mean I would mind—having a say as to the locality of the spot."

That was too much for the foreman, and Ben burst into a laugh, in which the little man joined heartily.

"Look hyar," said the cowboy, putting up the revolver; "you're 'bout ther oddest derved duck I ever run up ag'in'at."

"It really distresses me to have to correct you again," put in the odd stranger; "but I assure you I am not a duck, and I am certain you did not run up against me. It is just as easy to be correct in these little details."

"I reckon you're an escaped lunatic."

"You mean you think I am an escaped lunatic. Well, I am not, sir. I am an escaped doctor of medicine. I barely escaped death at the hands of my last patient's brother. You see, the patient died. Possibly you may not see it, but it is true that he died. His brother was wroth, and he pursued me out of town with a shot-gun. I am not sure the gun was loaded, but I didn't take any chances on that point. So you must understand I am an escaped doctor."

"You were lucky to escape."

"That may or may not be true. I am not ready to admit it is, and I will not say it isn't. Anyway, I am here. Did you inquire about my name a moment ago?"

"Did I?"

"Oh, beg your pardon. It's a common name. Do you mind common names?"

"Waal—"

"One so common as Dirk, for instance?"

"So your name is Doctor Dirk?"

"Did I say so? I have reasons to believe that is my name. I am not ready to assert it for a fact, but—"

"Never mind, pard; Dirk will do."

"Oh, very well. What is your name, sir?"

"Jordan."

"Taken from the river Jordan, I presume. Do you know all our names sprung from some such source. I have made a study—"

"Waal, we're losin' time."

"So am I—so am I. You seem to be going in my direction. Suppose we jog along together."

So the odd little doctor became one of the party. He was inclined to talk a great deal, repeatedly asserting he was a "man of precision," yet always avoiding a point when he could do so. Gradually, he learned the business of the trailers.

"This desperado you are after may prove a fighter, eh?" he questioned.

"He may show fight."

"Then my services will come in handy. I have my surgical instruments in this sachel—that is, I think I have them there. If I remember correctly, they were there this morning. I consider myself quite skillful in amputating an arm or a leg or anything of that sort. I trust I may get a little business out of this affair. Now, sir, it would be a real pleasure to cut off one of your legs—"

"Oh, it would!"

"You are such a magnificent man—such vitality! You would surely endure the operation. That is, I think you would. If you should happen to die, you would make a great subject for the dissecting table."

"That is pleasant!"

They talked in this manner until the hills were reached, Yellow Jack keeping track of the trail in the mean time. Julia, the strange girl, had very little to say.

Once fairly within the hills, the trail was lost. Silver Spur's horse had struck a rocky piece of ground, where no one but an Indian could follow the track he left.

"I'm afraid he will give us the slip, senors," said the Mexican.

"He mustn't!" cried Big Ben. "Ef he wiped out Dick Clark, he must be captered!"

They pushed on into the hills till they came to an old deserted hut. There they halted.

"We'll make this our headquarters while we scour this yer section," declared the foreman.

CHAPTER VI.

THE AMAZON SHOWS HER HAND.

LEAVING the others at the old cabin, Big Ben and Yellow Jack sought for the trail or some trace of the Ranch Mascot. Night came on and found them far from the cabin.

"We can't do anything more tell mornin'," reluctantly admitted the foreman. "I'm sorry, fer I'm feared lest he gits clean away."

Yellow Jack expressed his disappointment, and they turned their faces toward the old hut.

Of a sudden, they came upon the brink of a ravine. Yellow Jack's hand instantly fell on Big Ben's arm, and both men found themselves gazing down into a small pocket-like place, where burned a camp-fire.

Around the fire were eight men, sitting or reclining in various positions. Some were playing cards, some smoking, some reclining at ease on the ground.

With one exception, they were all masked.

And that exception—

Silver Spur Steve!

"Holy Moses!" gasped Big Ben. "Them fellers down thar are Red Dan's Rustlers!"

"Si, senor," whispered Yellow Jack.

"But thar's Steve with 'em!"

"Si, senor."

"What's it mean? Ther lad hain't trussed up; he don't look like a pris'ner."

"He is not," hissed the Mexican. "He is free!"

"Waal, how comes he thar?"

"He must be in league with the rustlers, senor."

"What, Cowboy Steve? I won't berlieve that! He may hev hed a grudge ag'in' Dick Clark an' wiped him out, but he hain't caboots with ther p'izen cattle-thieves."

"Why should he be there a free man? Ah, you must confess it does look bad, senor. If he were a prisoner—"

"He may be."

"There is no sign of it. See—he arises!"

The young cowboy was seen to get upon his feet and walk up and down before the fire. The other men seemed to pay very little attention to his movements. Steve's manner was gloomy and downcast.

"That settles it!" came harshly, but guardedly from the lips of the giant foreman of Rainbow Ranch. "He is a traitor, and in caboots with them dirty skunks. Otherwise he'd make a break. I've bin clean tooken in by ther boy. This shakes my confidence in human nater most mightily."

Yellow Jack said not a word, but Ben saw him make a significant motion. The big cowboy was just in time to prevent the Mexican from using his revolver.

"What the howlin' devils you tryin' ter do?" hissed Ben.

"Kill the two-faced dog!" half-snarled Yellow Jack. "He deserves death!"

Ben wrenched the revolver from Jack's hand.

"It seems ter me you take a powerful intrust in this yar 'fair fer a new man at ther ranch," he growled. "You hain't bin with us but ten days, yet hyar you be a-wantin' ter plug Steve Norman 'cause he's turned traitor!"

"Because he wiped out Dick Clark, senor."

"What was Clark ter you?"

"Nothing more than my comrade."

"Waal, I've hed extensive dealin's with yaller-skinks, but I'll say you're ther oddest critter I've struck. I dunno jest how ter size ye up."

The Mexican was no more than a baby in the huge cattleman's hands, and Ben made him promise not to use the revolver before he would surrender it.

"Now we'll git away from hyar," declared the foreman. "Ef we don't, you'll be givin' us clean away ter them critters down thar."

"Wait!" whispered Jack. "Look! He is walking away! Now is your time!"

Ben glanced down into the pocket, and was just in time to see the figure of Cowboy Steve walk from the circle of firelight and disappear in the shadows.

"We can shut him off and take him before he can get back, senor!" panted Yellow Jack.

"You may be right," confessed the foreman. "But you must promise to let me do all the work. I know you yaller-skinks; you're too mighty ready with ther knife. Ef we take this chap, he must be taken alive."

"Si, senor."

"All right. Follow."

The big cowboy moved swiftly, and Yellow Jack kept at his heels. Along the brink of the ravine they went until they found a place to descend, which they did without making a great deal of noise.

Fortune favored them for they came full

upon the very man they were looking for. In a moment, Big Ben had flung his long arms around Steve's body.

"Slow an' easy, pard!" cautiously commanded the giant cattleman. "It won't do ye nary durned bit of good to squirm, I hev ye."

An exclamation of astonishment broke from Steve's lips.

"Ben Jordan—impossible!"

"It's me, jest ther same," assured the foreman, retaining his clutch. "You're my prisoner, Steve, boy."

"But how—"

"No time fer askin' questions. You'll hev plenty chance later on."

"What do you mean? Your prisoner? What kind of a joke is this?"

"No joke at all, lad. Hyar, Jack, tie up his wrists."

Big Ben forced the young cowboy's hands behind him and the Mexican made them secure. All the while, Steve was protesting.

"This is an outrage, Ben Jordan!" he declared. "What have I done to merit this at your hands? Has Warren Milton trumped up a charge against me and sent you to bring me back?"

"Put the stopper on jest now, pard; you'll find out what it's all about later on. Come with us."

"But I can't go. If I leave here, I will break my word of honor."

"Then I reckon you'll hev ter break it. I've got ye, an' I'm goin' ter take ye back ter Rainbow Ranch."

"Go slow, Ben. A shout from my lips will bring half a score of men to my rescue."

"Do you want to live a while longer, boy?"

"Cert."

"Then you'll take good care not to give that shout. I tell ye now, I've got ye, an' afore Red Dan's Rustlers sh'd take ye from me, I'd blow the hull roof of yer head off. This is on the dead level, pard."

"But what—"

"Chain right up on questions! Ther hain't goin' ter be no monkey biz. March."

The captive was forced to obey, and Ben's stern orders kept him silent for a time, although he would break out now and then, only to be promptly silenced by the huge cowboy.

In that manner, they made their way to the deserted hut, where the others were awaiting their appearance.

Great was the excitement when it was found they had brought back Steve Norman a captive.

A "slut candle" had been discovered within the cabin, and by its light they eagerly surveyed the young cowboy, as if looking for signs of guilt upon his person.

"Any one would think me some strange animal from the manner in which I am treated!" came hotly from Steve's lips. "I demand to know what this is all about."

"I reckon you know well enough," sneered Jim Grant.

"I am utterly in the dark, and your words are insulting! I give you a pledge some one shall suffer for this!"

"Oh, you play ther bluff in great shape!"

"For God's sake tell me what it means!"

"Dick Clark is dead."

"Dick—Dick Clark dead?" and Cowboy Steve's astonishment did not seem in the least counterfeited.

"As ef you didn't know!" sneered Bud Rogers.

In a moment the color left Steve Norman's face.

"What is the meaning of those words?" he cried. "There is something I cannot understand hidden behind this! How did he die?"

"He wuz knifed."

"And you think— Great God! No, no, no! You don't mean that, pards—you can't. You know we were friends. Why should I harm poor Dick?"

"You quarreled—"

"That was all settled."

"It 'peared ter be, but— Waal, Dick hes bin wiped out, an' it looks like you done it."

"Look here, pards, if you will give me three hours' freedom, I pledge you my word of honor I will return to this spot and accompany you back to Rainbow Ranch. My horse, my weapons, everything I own is here in the hills, and, if you do not release me, I shall have to break my word with others who have trusted me. Won't you believe me? I swear I will return!"

"Murderers cannot be trusted," smiled Yellow Jack.

Steve turned to Big Ben.

"Ben, you know me. Won't you—"

"Don't ask it, pard—don't!"

"I swear I am innocent of this crime, and I am ready to prove my innocence, if given a fair show. Will no one believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you!"

From a dark corner in which she had been lurking Julia Ruthven darted to the captive's side.

"You—here?" exclaimed young Norman.

"Yes—here to save you!"

A knife flashed in her hand and the keen blade severed the cord that secured his hands.

"There is an open window at your back!" she screamed. "You can escape that way!"

Then she leaped toward one of the astounded cowboys and snatched a revolver from his belt.

"I'll kill the first man who makes a move to stop him!" she declared, cocking the heavy revolver.

CHAPTER VII.

DOCTOR DIRK'S LITTLE TRICK.

THE beautiful Amazon was in deadly earnest. Her blue eyes flashed and the hand that held the heavy revolver was steady as a rock.

"Holy jeel!" gasped Jim Grant. "Hain't she a daisy!"

The young woman meant to save Silver Spur Steve at any cost, but no one was more astonished by her sudden move than the young cowboy himself.

"Quick!" she panted. "Out of the window! Your road to liberty is open!"

But Cowboy Steve did not stir.

"No," he said, coldly. "I refuse to accept my liberty at your hands!"

"You are mad! They will lynch you!"

"I will take my chances, rather than to be thus indebted to you."

She turned pale as a corpse and the revolver fell from her hand. His words had struck home, and she swayed as if on the point of falling, putting out one hand blindly, while the other she pressed to her bosom.

Bud Rogers took a step forward to catch her, but she recovered herself and turned from him.

Silver Spur stepped toward Big Ben, holding out his hands.

"Truss me up again, pard," he said. "I may as well accept what fate has in store for me."

The big cowboy hesitated.

"Ef so be ye'll giv yer word that ye won't try ter make a break—" he began.

The Ranch Mascot interrupted him.

"I could not trust myself that far," he declared. "Knowing the true condition of affairs, I might think it right to do the best thing, regardless of promises. No, Ben; tie me up. I'll be safer."

Without a word, Julia Ruthven moved away.

Old Dr. Dirk came forward, nodding and rubbing his hands.

"It really begins to appear as if I would not get a job here," he said. "Now that is too bad—at least, I consider it too bad. Other people may look on it in a different light. I have kept in the background, out of the way of danger, as I supposed, until I should be needed; and now it seems I am not needed at all. You should have more consideration for my feelings—you really should."

He looked Cowboy Steve over critically.

"A fair-appearing young fellow," he commented. "That is, I consider him a fine-appearing young fellow. Don't look like a cut-throat. He never killed anybody—at least, that is my opinion."

"Your opinion is not called for," growled Jim Grant. "Jest you take a back seat."

"I hate to do it, Steve, boy," said Big Ben, as he prepared to tie the young man's hands again; "but, if ye won't promise—"

"Go ahead," nodded the Ranch Mascot.

No more words were wasted.

"We had better start for Rainbow Ranch at once, senors," said Yellow Jack. "The Rustlers are near, and they might find us here."

"Which is very true," nodded Big Ben. "We will not delay about getting back."

But when they were ready to start, it was discovered that the Amazon was missing, a discovery that created no little consternation and alarm.

"Whar could she hev gone?" cried the cattleman. "I sw'ar, I didn't see her leave ther shanty."

Nor had any one else, yet she was gone.

"Look fer her boss," advised Jim Grant.

They did so, and found the animal with the others.

"She's shorely clost at hand," was the opinion of the foreman. "I'll call her."

But his calls elicited no response.

"Whar kin she hev gone, Steve?" asked Ben, anxiously.

The captive shook his head.

"You can answer that question as well as I," he declared.

For half an hour they searched in the vicinity of the cabin, and then they decided she must have wandered away.

"We can't go back ter Rainbow Ranch without her," said Ben. "Grant, I'll leave you ter watch Steve. Rogers an' ther yaller skin'll go with me. We're goin' ter make a hunt of it."

"Permit me to inquire what department I am going to fill," put in the little doctor.

"Oh, you don't count," was the reply. "You kin do w'at yer please."

"You are more than kind—that is, I consider you more than kind. I will proceed to make myself comfortable right here."

When the others were gone, the doctor proceeded to make himself as comfortable as possible. Steve had thrown himself down in a corner, his attitude one of deep dejection and despair. Dirk sat down on the floor, for want of a better seat, placed his back against the wall, opened his little sachel and took out a pack of cards. With these he began a game of solitaire.

Jim Grant filled the pipe and lighted it, idly watching the queer doctor.

After awhile, the cowboy burst out with:

"Thet thar must be int'rustin'!"

"Allow me to correct you in a minor detail," said the doctor looking up. "It is not at all a case of *must*, I assure you. It *may* be interesting, perchance it is; but there is no reason why it *must* be."

Then he resumed the game.

Grant held in as long as he could, but he finally asked:

"Kin yer play seven-up?"

"I can—at least, I think I can. If I remember correctly, that is my favorite game."

"Bet I kin wax ye."

"Now I am no sport, but I'll venture a small amount that you're not built on the correct plan for performing that little trick."

That was enough; five minutes later the two men were deep in the game of seven-up, a small wager having been made.

Grant won the first game.

"Haw! haw!" he laughed. "I knowed it! Why, Doc, you're a plum! You don't know the rudiments of ther game."

"Perchance not, but I am willing to double the amount that I win this time."

"It's a go."

Again they played, and again Grant won.

His mirth was unlimited.

"I never struck such a soft snap!" he chuckled.

The doctor dived into his sachel and produced a flat bottle. Remov'nig the cork, he seemed to take a long swig.

"Hyar, pass it around!" cried Grant, as Dirk seemed on the point of putting it back in the sachel. "Don't try ter play ther hog."

"Do go light on it, I entreat!" anxiously urged the doctor. "It's a little stimulant I have to use in my business. I am only able to carry a limited amount."

"Queer tastin' stuff—but purty good," commented the cowboy, as he set the bottle down. "Don't put the bottle up, Doc; we may need it ag'in."

They did; the bottle was called into frequent use, and Jim Grant lowered it rapidly.

From the time the cowboy took the first drink he lost steadily.

"Durned strange!" he muttered, in a dazed manner. "I don't seem ter be in this yar game. Thought I hed struck a fresh, but I reckon you do know your biz, Doc."

"I have been told so before," blandly smiled the odd little man. "I really think I am rather sly."

"Zash stuff of yours ish purty good," declared Jim, his tongue feeling strangely thick and heavy in his mouth.

"It works in hands."

"Zash so."

"You seem to have a weary air, my friend."

"Rasher sleepy," Jim nodded. "Can't sleep, though; gotter watch Steve. Your deal."

But the game had already become a farce, and it was not long before Jim stretched himself on the floor.

"Shay, Doc," he mumbled, "ish zis a square deal? I think you've played me fer a shucker. Doc, I'll—I'll git—"

Then he began to snore.

When Big Ben and his companions returned to the cabin, they found Jim Grant stretched on the floor, sleeping peacefully.

Doctor Dirk had vanished, and, Silver Spur was also gone!

"Merry blue blazes is ter pay!" roared Big Ben. "Thar's bin crooked work! Wake that howlin' fool an' find out w'at's happened. Fu'st the gal gone, and now Steve's got clean away! I b'lieve it's all ther work of that infernal little runt of a doctor!"

It was not an easy thing to arouse Grant, but they finally succeeded.

"Here, you merry fool!" cried the foreman.

"Where's your prisoner?"

Jim stared around blankly.

"Wheremi?" he gurgled.

Ben shook him fiercely.

"You were left to guard Steve Norman.

Where is he?"

"Ish Steve gone?"

"He hain't byar."

"Lemme 'lone—lemme die!" urged Jim. "I'm all reddy ter die now!"

"What hev you bin doin'?"

"Foolin' wish a buzz shaw. Thought Doc was shoft—he'sh shark. Money gone—Doc gone—Steve gone! Cush a fool!"

Then he fell back on the floor and snored again.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BOND OF BLOOD.

THE night was far spent.

Two men stood facing each other in the heart of the Blue Hills.

One wore a mask, but the face of the other was not covered.

A short distance away a small fire burned. Near the fire lay several human forms, while one man paced up and down, on guard.

The man whose face was not hidden by a mask was Cowboy Steve, the Ranch Mascot.

The other man was speaking:

"Can you ask for more evidence? You ought to be satisfied, now. You must acknowledge I am your father."

"You have certainly brought evidence enough to prove it," confessed Steve Norman; "but, it is a hard thing to believe."

"Still, you cannot disbelieve. You know now that I am your father. Your mother deserted me for another man. It was her deed that made me what I am—a criminal, an outlaw! I loved her, and never once had I suspected her of guilt. I considered John Jayne my truest friend, but he secretly won the affections of my wife and induced her to desert me. When I followed the guilty pair, Jayne attempted to murder me. He failed, but I did not recover from the wound he gave me for many weeks. When I did recover, he had disappeared, and Jessie, my wife, had vanished with him."

"What became of them?"

"Jayne, I think, is still living; but your mother, my boy, is dead. The brute misused her, and, when she was dying, she sent me a letter, asking forgiveness. She told me Jayne had another wife when he married her. He had tired of her very soon, and then his cruelty soon ended her life. That letter made a madman of me."

The masked man moved restlessly up and down a few steps, then halted before the young cowboy once more, adding:

"I renewed my oath to find and kill him. I sought him everywhere, and one night, in a 'Frisco dive, I thought I had found him. I only saw the side of his face, but I was sure of my man. I drove a knife between his shoulders. As he fell, I saw his face."

"It was not John Jayne!"

"I had made a horrible mistake, and stained my hands with the blood of an innocent person. I knew what that meant, and I fled for my life. From that day to this, I have been an outlaw—a hunted creature. Never have I met Jayne, but I believe the time will come."

Steve Norman shuddered and drew back a step. Was this man—this murderer—his father? Impossible!

The mask seemed to read his thoughts, for he made a quick gesture, laughingly bitterly.

"You are horrified, eh? Well, I scarcely wonder; and still you cannot think me so very much to blame. Fate has been against me. I have utterly lost all trace of Jayne, but I have reasons to believe he will come to Rainbow Ranch sooner or later. That is why I linger in this vicinity."

"What will bring him here?"

"Warren Milton is his brother, for Jayne's true name was Milton."

"Then that is why you seem to have a grudge against Milton—that is why your raids had nearly ruined him, two years ago?"

"Is it more than natural I should dislike the man?"

"He is not accountable for his brother's deeds."

"I know that, yet still I dislike him. I was driven from these parts nearly two years ago, and I have just returned. You are a favorite at Rainbow Ranch, and you must act as my spy. You can tell me if Milton's brother appears—you can tell me many things I wish to know."

"Do you think I will play such a part?"

"Why not?"

"It would be a breach of honor."

"Honor be—hanged! Blood before honor! My boy, there is a bond of blood between us, and you must stick by me. I promise you shall not do anything so very dishonorable. You are simply to watch for my old enemy—the man who has wronged me and wronged you bitterly. He might appear in the night and go away in the night, without my knowing anything about it. I don't intend to murder the man, but simply to make him meet me in a fair duel. That is the only way I can accomplish my purpose."

"It is not possible for me to return to Rainbow Ranch."

"Why?"

"I resigned my position there and have left."

"Paugh! That is nothing!"

"But I am now charged with murder."

"What?"

Steve then told of the grave charge against him, the outlaw listening with interest.

"You did not kill this man?" asked the mask.

"I am not a murderer!" was the cowboy's hot retort.

"Then they will not be able to prove it against you. You must go back and face it out."

Steve proceeded to tell of his capture by Big Ben and Yellow Jack.

"They intended to take me back," he said; "but the queer old doctor drugged the man left to guard me and then set me free. Otherwise, the pledge I had given your lieutenant would have been broken, though through no fault of mine."

"Where is this doctor?"

"I do not know whither he went. He left me soon after setting me at liberty."

"And you—"

"Came here to meet you, as I agreed."

"Good! Now I have a plan for restoring you to the confidence of the men of Rainbow Ranch."

"A plan?"

"Yes. You are to rescue Warren Milton's daughter from Red Dan."

Steve started back, in his astonishment.

"Rescue her from you?" he exclaimed.

"That's what I said."

"But she—she—"

"She is my captive."

"Impossible!"

The mask laughed, shortly.

"Not at all, my boy. Red Dan, or Raymond Blair, just as you may choose to call me, was at work during the hours you waited for him. At sunset I was within sight of Rainbow Ranch."

"Well?"

"Iva Milton was kind enough to stray into my hands, and I promptly kidnapped her."

The Ranch Mascot uttered an exclamation of horror and dismay.

"No, no; not that!"

"Just that," nodded the mask.

"Where is she now?"

"Safe."

Suddenly Cowboy Steve advanced on the outlaw.

"Man, have you harmed her? If so—"

"Cool and easy, boy! She is not harmed in the least."

"If you dare harm her—"

"What?"

"I would forget the bond of blood! You should answer for so foul a deed!"

"Brave! That is the kind of talk I like to hear! I am rather proud of my son. She has not been harmed and will not be, for you shall take her back to Rainbow Ranch."

"Do you mean that?"

"I do."

"You will set her free?"

"No; you shall save her."

"I do not understand."

"Then I will explain. You are to figure in a mock rescue."

"Make it plainer."

"All right. The girl is not far from here. I

will have her brought to that fire over there. Suddenly you, mounted on your horse, shall dash out of the darkness, firing right and left. My men will appear seized with confusion. You will dash through the camp and catch up the girl, escaping in the darkness. She will believe you a hero, and her father will welcome you with open arms when you bring her in safety to the ranch."

Cowboy Steve was silent. Plainly, he was thinking of the proposal. Red Dan calmly awaited his decision.

"This is anything but a square deal," the young cowboy finally said; "but for Iva's sake—"

"You consent. That's right. You have a few foolish scruples you must get rid of, my boy. The man with scruples has a hard time of it in this world. I will see that your weapons are returned to you, and I will take care they are loaded with blank cartridges. I wouldn't care to have you open up on us with regulars."

"But some of your men may take a fancy to pop me over."

"I will look out for that, never fear. You will be all right. Is it a go?"

"It is."

"That settles it. I will find a way of telling you how to communicate with me after you return to Rainbow Ranch."

"If I am not lynched."

"You need not fear that."

A short time later, Iva Milton was brought to the fire. Concealed by the shadows, Cowboy Steve saw her, and his heart was pained by the look of fear and distress on her beautiful face. She had been weeping bitterly.

"The infernal hounds!" thought the brave-souled cowboy, as he fingered his revolvers, lately restored to him. "I wish the cartridges in these weapons were charged with bullets! I cannot lift my hand against Red Dan, but I have no spark of love for him, even though he may be my father—which I do doubt."

"I will save her, but I will not become the outlaw's spy. I have not given a pledge to do so."

It was Red Dan himself who brought the young man's horse.

In a few moments, everything was ready, and Steve swung into the saddle.

"All right, my boy," softly chuckled the chief of the Rustlers. "Wade in and cover yourself with glory!"

Steve touched his spirited horse with the spur and the animal leaped forward. At the same moment, a wild yell pealed from the Ranch Mascot's lips, and he began firing his revolvers.

Into the circle of firelight shot the black horse. The outlaws sprung up with loud cries of apparent dismay. Leaning well over in the saddle, Cowboy Steve grasped the stout belt about Iva's waist. With a powerful surge, he straightened up in the saddle, swinging her in front of him.

Then the black horse shot into the darkness once more, and the mock rescue was completed!

CHAPTER IX.

LOYAL LITTLE IVA.

THE trick was performed so naturally it really seemed like a genuine rescue.

Iva had caught a glimpse of Steve's face, and clung to him when he swung her up in front.

Behind them were the yelling outlaws, their cries growing fainter and fainter with each moment.

"Iva!"

"Steve!"

"You are safe!"

"Thanks to you, Steve."

Her faith in him was perfect. The darkness concealed the bitter smile that played for one moment about his lips.

Soon the cries of the Rustlers could be no longer heard. Then he gradually pulled the horse into a slower pace, finally stopping him.

"Are your nerves steady, Miss Milton?"

She tried to force a laugh, but it was a failure.

"I think so."

"If I place you behind me, will you cling fast?"

"Yes."

The shift was made.

"Now we are all right," he said.

"Where are we going?"

"Straight to Rainbow Ranch."

"I am so glad!" she joyfully exclaimed.

"You are so brave and noble! I shall never forget what you have done this night—never!"

"I trust you may."

"What—forget?"

"Yes."

"Who could forget such a heroic deed? They

shall all know what you have done, and then—
 Oh, Steve!"

"What is it?"

"Dick Clark—"

"I know all about it."

"You know?" she cried, in wonder. "How?"

"From Big Ben's lips."

"Then you have seen him?"

"I was his captive not so very long ago."

"His captive?"

"Yes; but I succeeded in giving Jim Grant the slip. Grant was left to guard me. I was assisted to escape by a queer old fellow who calls himself a doctor. This odd old man set me free and told me he did not believe me guilty. Then we parted."

"What became of the doctor?"

"I do not know."

"His name—I must know his name! But for him you would not have been able to save me from those horrid Rustlers."

"He gave his name as Dirk."

"I hope I may see him some time, and tell him how well he judged you. How can any one think you anything but all that is honest and noble?"

"You grow enthusiastic, Miss Milton."

"Call me Iva—please."

"If you wish me to, but I fear you will think me presuming."

"Presuming—nothing! You are just the dearest fellow! I don't wonder Julia loves you!"

"Julia—loves—"

"Of course you know—you must know! She loves you so much—"

"Did she ever tell you this?"

"No; but I suspected it. And you—you love her as—"

"I protest!"

"What's the use! I'm not blind. I'm glad it's Julia, Steve, though I—I—"

"You what, Iva?"

"Well, I did like you pretty well myself. There! I know you'll think me bold; but I can't help it! I'm always giving myself dead away. You're a brick, Steve, and Julia's one of the best girls in all the world. We were the greatest chums at school! She's so frank and honest, I liked her from the minute I set my eyes on her."

The listening cowboy coughed, but said not a word. They were moving forward slowly, for he knew there was no danger of pursuit. It almost seemed that Iva had forgotten the perils through which she had passed.

"But, she's an awful little coward," continued the girl. "She is afraid of the dark, of a mouse, of everything."

Steve smiled cynically, but she did not see him.

"It's an awful wonder how she happened to go with Big Ben and the others to-day. She must have been crazy because there was such a charge against you, and— My gracious! If Big Ben captured you, you must have seen Julia!"

"I did," came calmly from Steve's lips.

"What makes you speak so strangely?"

He hesitated about replying, and then tried to parry the question:

"Did I speak strangely?"

"Your voice sounded so harsh. What made it?"

"I don't know. How long will it take us to make the ranch?"

But she was not to be turned aside in such a manner.

"Steve."

"What?"

"There is something I do not understand between you and Julia."

"How preposterous! We happened to know each other some time ago; that is all."

"Ah, but is it all? It seems to me you must have had a lover's quarrel, or something of the sort. I remember how strangely you both appeared when you came face to face at the ranch. I am sure you both hesitated about speaking."

The Ranch Mascot said nothing.

"Lovers' quarrels are silly," Iva continued, with an air of great wisdom. "Lots of times they separate loving hearts and cause lots of misery all about nothing. Now, if you and Julia have quarreled, I advise you to make right up."

"Bless your little heart!" half-laughed the handsome young cowboy. "You are wasting all this good advice. Julia and I are nothing to each other and can never be anything."

"But don't you really love her?"

"Not at all—not in the slightest degree."

"Honest and true?"

"On my honor. Would I be otherwise with you?"

"Well, I'm sorry for Julia, but—but—I might feel worse."

This confession was made in the most artless manner imaginable.

"You and I have always been pretty good friends, Steve," coyly observed the girl, after several minutes of silence.

"You have been my good angel, Iva," he declared, with deep feeling. "As long as I live, I'll not forget you!"

"I'm so glad! But, if you go away where you can't see me, you may forget."

"There is no danger of that."

Another period of silence.

"Steve."

"Well, Iva?"

"I have thought about going away, myself."

"You—going away? Where?"

"Oh, I don't know—somewhere. You don't intend to become a cattleman, do you?"

"I do not think I shall."

"I don't blame you. I'm not dead stuck on this living on a ranch, though I tell father it's great. Do you prefer living in a city?"

"I believe so."

"I believe I do, too. Running a ranch is just a freak of father's, and he'll lose all his luck when you leave him. I told him so."

"I trust that will not come true."

"Father does not know you as well as I do."

"It is possible you do not know me as well as you think you do, Miss Milton. If you knew the truth, your admiration for me would be instantly killed."

"Never!" she cried, decisively.

"It will be brought to the test, for I am going to tell you all. Miss Milton, your rescue from those outlaws to-night was all a farce. I confess it was the only way I could free you from their clutches, but it was agreed upon between Red Dan and myself."

She was shocked into silence.

"Not one of the shots which I fired took effect, for my revolvers were loaded with blank cartridges. We were not pursued at all, and at no time was I in the least danger."

"But—but—why—"

"Why was this done? That I might take you back to Rainbow Ranch and pose as a hero. It was not my scheme, believe me; it was that of Red Dan, the Rustler. He wants me to act as his spy."

"His spy? You—will—not do that?"

"No! decidedly! I deceived him into thinking I had accepted his proposition, but I had not the least intention of doing such a thing."

"Then—then you are a hero, just the same, Steve! You fooled the Rustler chief and saved me from him."

"I did all that. But you have not heard the worst."

"No?"

"This man—this cattle-thief, murderer—claims that I am his son."

A cry of horror broke from the girl's lips.

"It is not true!" she gasped. "It cannot be!"

"I am not sure of that, Miss Milton. My early life is shadowed by a great mystery, and he brought what seemed to be proof that I am what he claims."

For a few moments, the girl was silent; then she cried:

"I will not believe it true—nothing in all the world can ever make me believe it!"

Loyal little Iva!

CHAPTER X.

THE RETURN TO THE RANCH.

THE lights of Rainbow Ranch were to be seen in the distance, when a horse and rider suddenly wheeled out of a little patch of timber and drew to a stand-still in their path.

"Who's there?" challenged Silver Spur, his hand on a ready revolver.

"A harmless old pilgrim—at least, I think I am harmless. Who are you? I seem to recognize that voice—that is, I think I seem to recognize it."

"Doctor Dirk!"

"I am pretty sure that is my name. And you—"

"The man you helped to his liberty some hours ago."

"Well, I declare—there's not a doubt about it—I do declare! I didn't think of meeting you again to-night. Now that statement is not accurate. I should have said I did not think I would meet you again to-night. I thought of meeting you more than once. But you seem to have a companion."

"A young lady whom, by good fortune and deception, I saved from the rascals who had kidnapped her. You know I told you of Warren Milton and Rainbow Ranch?"

"I think I know it."

"Well, this is Milton's daughter."

"Young lady," said the queer old doctor, removing his hat and bowing in the darkness, "I salute you. I am Simon Dirk, M. D., an old crank. I suppose I am an old crank, for almost everybody calls me that. I trust you are not harmed by the perils through which you have passed?"

"Not at all, sir, thank you."

"You must be pretty—at least, that is my judgment, for you have a sweet voice. You won't mind if I appear a trifle queer at times? This is put in the form of a question."

"Oh, no, sir; I'll not mind."

"Thank you. I am thinking of going on to Rainbow Ranch. That is how I came here—searching for it. I had just detected the light glimmering yonder when I heard you approaching, and saw you through the darkness. I thought you must be going thither, so I ventured to join you."

"You are a most unsophisticated man, doctor—apparently—or you would not risk so much on an uncertainty. What if we had proved to be ruffians and robbers?"

"My dear sir, I am quite at home among ruffians and robbers. I sometimes find them really entertaining and jolly. Up to date, they have never injured me in any way."

"But, young man, you are thrusting your head into the lion's jaws by returning to Rainbow Ranch. On this point I will venture to make a positive assertion."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I lay in concealment after I effected your release and overheard the conversation of the cattlemen when they returned. I think you will find yourself in a tight box if you go back there now. The evidence is against you, and you may not be able to prove your innocence. This man who was murdered was very popular—at least, I infer as much."

"Which is right?"

"Then take my advice and stay away from the ranch."

"Impossible! They would surely think me a coward and guilty."

"Let them think so for a time, young man, if you are able to prove your innocence in the end. I have a theory. I believe you have a foe at Rainbow Ranch, and that he has sought to destroy you. The trap is well arranged—at least, so it seems. Once caught fast, you will not be given time to prove your innocence. Is it not better to keep away until you can bring a perfect alibi?"

"But staying away from the ranch will not aid me in bringing it."

"It will—that is, I believe it will."

"How?"

"I intend stopping at the ranch a while."

"Well?"

"I will look out for your interests."

"In what way?"

"I will play the detective. I presume you trust this young woman or—a hem!—girl?"

"With my life."

"It is possible she will aid me in the work of establishing your innocence?"

"I will do everything in my power," assured Iva.

"Now that seems to fix it—really, you must confess it seems to fix it. We will work together for your final vindication. It is possible we shall be able to expose and bring to justice your enemy—the one who killed Clark and made the deed seem your work."

Steve was silent for some moments, then he suddenly exclaimed:

"I'll be hanged if I can understand your motive in this, old man!"

"Never mind if you can't understand it now. I have a motive—at least, I think I have one. That may be revealed later on—and it may not be. You had better trust me."

"No! They would all say I am a coward! I must go and face it."

"It is better to be called a coward, and live to be vindicated, than it is to be considered nervy and find yourself lynched for something you never did. Anyhow, that is the way I look at the matter."

"Doctor Dirk is right," asserted Iva.

Then she joined in urging Steve to remain away from Rainbow Ranch until some evidence could be obtained in his favor.

"I see this is the best course now," she declared. "They were very fierce against you, and you may not be given a fair show. For my sake, please don't go back there now."

"What shall I do?" was the Ranch Mascot's helpless question.

"Remain near at hand."

"Hiding, like a dog! I'll never—"

"Now don't be hasty," urged the oily voice of the odd little doctor. "Just consider it a little."

It was a long time before they could persuade Steve to adopt the course suggested, but they finally succeeded. Then Iva was transferred to the doctor's horse, and they were ready to part.

Iva held out her hand to Steve.

"Remember, we will do our best," she said. "Something tells me we shall succeed in clearing you."

"I trust so; but I shall only remain away ten days. If you do not notify me to appear before the end of that time, I shall give myself up and meet my trial."

"Ten days are quite sufficient," assured Dr. Dirk. "At least, I consider them quite sufficient."

"I shall always know you are innocent," whispered Iva, still clinging to Steve's hand.

"I thank you for your faith."

A few words more, and then Steve watched them riding toward the twinkling light.

"I feel like a sneak," he muttered; "but I have agreed to lay low, and I suppose I must. It is the first time in all my life I ever did such a thing."

When Dr. Dirk and Iva arrived at Rainbow Ranch they found everything in confusion. No one slept about the place. Searching parties were out for Iva, and Big Ben's trailers had not come in. Warren Milton was out somewhere with the searchers.

In front of the ranch a flagstaff had been erected some months before, and, as soon as Iva appeared, a red light was run up to the head of this staff. This was to notify the searchers of the fact that the lost was found.

However, dawn was at hand, and it was near midday when all the searchers came in.

Warren Milton was among the last, and his joy was deep and speechless when he held his daughter in his arms. His pale face and blood-shot eyes told of the bitter agony he had endured.

Of course, Iva was compelled to tell all about her capture and how she was rescued from the rustlers. Steve Norman's actions were commented on variously, but all wondered at his failure to return to the ranch with her.

"Looks mighty bad," muttered one cowboy to another. "Ther cuss may hev saved Miss Iva, but he darsen't face ther charge ag'in' him. I reckon he wiped out Dick shore enough."

"I reckon so, too," agreed the other.

These things were not said in Iva's presence, but she caught a word now and then, and it was with difficulty she could keep from defending the young cowboy. But—

She had not forgotten the "bond of blood."

She could not tell them the whole truth, for she knew that would make the outlook still blacker for Steve.

It was nearly night when Big Ben and his three companions returned to the ranch. They looked crestfallen and humiliated, Jim Grant being overcome with shame.

Grant was astounded beyond measure when Warren Milton handed him a sum of money, saying:

"You know my rules about gambling while on duty, Grant. Here is the sum you lost to a stranger last night, and you may consider yourself lucky to obtain it again."

"Why—why—how—" stammered the cowboy.

"The money was given me for you by the man who won it from you."

"Whar is he?" howled Jim, in sudden fury. "Ther derved onery little rip! I'll jest paralyze—"

"How do you do, my friend—at least, you should be my friend, sir," said an oily voice, and Dr. Dirk appeared on the scene, bowing blandly.

"Holy smoke!" shouted the cowboy. "Hyar he is! Let me hammer—"

Warren Milton's hand arrested him.

"Stop!" commanded the rancher. "This man is my guest. He has done me a service, and he is not to be harmed while he remains beneath my roof."

"But ther critter doped me an set Steve free!"

"By so doing he rendered me a service at the time, for Steve rescued Iva. Let it drop."

And Jim was forced to resist his desire to hammer the odd little doctor.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BULLWHACKER'S BLOW.

THE cowboys were not inclined to place much confidence in Silver Spur Steve's assertion that he would return to the ranch within ten days.

"He'd 'a' come right erlong, ef he wuz comin'," was the universal opinion.

They did not take at all kindly to old Dr. Dirk, but, as the doctor was a guest, he escaped rough treatment.

"Ther old varmint better keep out of my way!" Jim Grant growled more than once. "Ef I see him round too much, I may fergit w'at ther boss said."

For all of this, the doctor was around a great deal. In fact, he seemed to be everywhere, and his eyes and ears were always open.

In vain searching parties were sent out to look for Julia Ruthven. She seemed to have disappeared completely, and it was thought she had wandered away into the Blue Hills and perished there.

Thinking of her lost friend, Little Iva wept herself ill. The missing girl had reported herself as living with her aunt, but she had given no one at Rainbow Ranch the address of this aunt.

"We shall not be able to notify her friends of her disappearance," said Warren Milton.

Dick Clark, the murdered cowboy, was given a rather elaborate funeral, cattlemen from all the surrounding ranches being present and a minister from Blue Nose being engaged to "orate." The minister spoke highly of the dead cowboy, but the principal mourners agreed he didn't "pile it on a bit too thick."

When the funeral was all over, the men of Rainbow Ranch turned their attention to finding the missing girl and capturing Steve Norman.

Five days passed, and neither of these things was accomplished. Then it was decided Steve had fled the section and Julia was dead, without a doubt.

With the disappearance of the Ranch Mascot bad luck seemed to immediately return to Rainbow, for the rustlers broke into the corral and ran off all the finest horses kept there. Fortunately, the very best animals were kept in the stable, and these were not stolen. Some of them, however, died in a very suspicious manner, and investigation showed they were poisoned. Cattle among the grazing herds also began to fall dead in an amazing manner, and one night the ranch was found afire. Sharp work extinguished the flame, but had it not been discovered soon after starting, the ranch would have been destroyed.

"I told you!" cried Iva, when her father complained of the sudden manner in which all these things had come upon him. "The moment Steve, left our fortune vanished. He was the Mascot of Rainbow."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Milton. "That is all nonsense!"

"You may think so, but I am sure it is not nonsense."

One day the report came that Silver Spur Steve had been seen in Blue Nose. This created no little excitement, and Big Ben immediately asked permission to take over a party of men and see if he could not be captured.

Milton did not object to this.

Five of the cowboys rode over to Blue Nose, Yellow Jack being with them. Although he had said nothing, the Spaniard had scarcely closed his eyes since the disappearance of Julia Ruthven. He had managed to be included in all the parties who went out in search for the girl, and he was always the most reluctant about returning to the ranch. An attempt to chaff him about this had aroused his fiercest anger and nearly caused a fight.

Jack seemed quite downcast and blue.

The party arrived in Blue Nose at about nine in the evening, and they proceeded to the principal saloon, the "Sunset," without delay.

To their astonishment, the first person they saw on entering was little Dr. Dirk.

"The onery little spider!" growled Big Ben. "Why, we left him at ther ranch w'en we started! How ther rollin' thunder did he git hyar?"

That was a question easier asked than answered. The little doctor was there, and that was about all they knew about it.

"We won't see nuthin' of Steve Norman," asserted Jim Grant. "Thet fake doctor hes gi'n him a pointer. Thet's jest w'at he's hyar fer, you bet!"

"Caramba!" exclaimed Yellow Jack. "Give him the knife!"

"Say," broke in Budd Rogers, "now is our time to do Doctor Dirk. He is not at Rainbow Ranch, and so he hain't under the protection of Milton. Let's fix him!"

"Hold on," commanded Big Ben. "Thar hain't goin' ter be no shootin' or cuttin'. I reckon one man hed best tackle him."

"Then I'm ther galoot!" urged Jim Grant.

It was decided Grant had the greatest grievance against the doctor, and he was permitted to do the "punishing."

"You're my meat!" declared Jim, as he swaggered up to the little man. "You're the lulu I'm lookin' fer!"

"Really," smiled Dirk, "I dislike to correct you, but it is best to be proper in your speech. You are not looking for me at all, as you have already found me."

"Oh, you won't bother ter be so derved correct arter I hev done with yer! I'm goin' ter punch ther face off yer!"

"You mean you *think* you are going to do this violent thing. As to your doing so, there are various opinions about that."

"You won't be no more'n a pinch fer me."

"That is another thing of which you cannot be absolutely certain."

"Waal, I'm comin'."

"Sa-ay," drawled Dr. Dirk, suddenly producing a revolver and appearing to examine it in a most interested manner, "suppose we talk this affair over a bit."

The sight of the revolver took Grant by surprise.

"You measly little imp!" he gasped. "Do you think of usin' that?"

"I have seriously contemplated it," confessed the doctor.

Jim took a long step and reached for the weapon, intending to snatch it from Dirk's hand.

He was not successful.

Like a cat the odd little doctor stepped aside, and the muzzle of the weapon was thrust fairly against the cowboy's right ear.

"You tempt me—I am sure you tempt me seriously," said the oily voice of the little man. "I don't really care to kill you, but I have found it good policy to look out for number one."

Having expressed himself thus, he suddenly retreated a few steps, being beyond Grant's reach when that astonished worthy whirled in his tracks.

"Holy smoke!" gasped Jim. "Be you lookin' fer trouble of that sort?"

"I am not looking for trouble of any sort."

"Then putt up yer gun."

"And allow you to pound me—no, thank you."

"Then I'll—"

"I don't think you will."

The cowboy found himself "covered," and the weapon in the small man's hand did not quiver a bit.

"Hyar! hyar!" cried the proprietor of the saloon. "No shootin' round this ranch!"

"Then keep this man away from me, sir," said the odd doctor. "If he insists on bothering me, I think I shall blow the whole upper side of his head off."

"W'at yer want ter crowd a little galoot fer?" demanded Hunk Jones, the saloon-keeper, who was a most desperate character, always having plenty of bangers-on who would leap into a fight at his call. "You git, an' leave the small critter be!"

"But—"

"I tell you ter git!"

Jim went back to his companions.

"Look here," he said, "do we want to tackle Hunk Jones and his gang?"

"Not much!"

"Then we'll hev ter wait tell Doc Dirk leaves the saloon. Jones stands in with him."

Among those who had watched this scene was a rough-looking fellow whose face was covered by a bristling black beard. His dress was that of a cattleman or bullwhacker, but there were no weapons in the leather belt that surrounded his waist. He stood with his feet planted wide apart and his hands on his hips.

Seeing the doctor was in no danger of being harmed just then, this man turned his attention to a strange masked boy, who was venturing money on a game of chance called Red and Black.

In some respects Red and Black is like faro, only four packs of cards are shuffled together and thrust into the box. As the dealer pulls the cards from the box, he places three of them in separate piles without exposing them; the fourth is exposed and is afterward placed in another pile, face upward. A player can bet that red or black will turn, or can lay a wager on high or low, the suit or the card that will turn. Even money is paid on red or black and high and low, the splits being the bank's percentage. On suit the player gets three to one, having one chance in four. If he calls the card, he gets thirty-six to one, but he has only one chance in fifty-two. Unless run by a crooked

dealer, the game is purely one of chance, and the chance is in favor of the bank.

The strange masked boy had attracted considerable attention to his playing, as he was something of a "plunger," and he seemed to be lucky. Time after time he placed his chips in three positions—on red, low and diamonds—and won all three ventures. His playing was utterly without method, and yet fortune clung to him. Twice in succession he called the card, winning thirty-six to one.

"Ef he keeps this up, he'll break the bank," was the word passed around.

"You're dead in it, young feller," nodded the dealer.

The boy bowed, but made no reply.

"Who is he?"

The question passed from mouth to mouth, but no one seemed able to answer it.

"Most likely some kid as don't want his pap to know," was the almost universal opinion.

There was a strange look in the eyes of the black-whiskered bullwhacker, as he continued to watch the boy. He crowded close to the table.

"Hello, there!" called the dealer. "Do you want to get into this game?"

The bullwhacker shook his head.

"Nary time, pard," he replied. "I'm clean busted wide open—scooped."

"Then don't crowd ahead of others."

"Carajo!" cried Yellow Jack, who was trying to get up to the table. "Get out of the way and let me have a chance, great calf!"

"Whoop!" shouted the bullwhacker, his beard seeming to bristle fiercely. "W'at was that I heard? Did you refer to me, you yaller-skinned monkey?"

The Spaniard fairly gasped with rage.

"Yes, you! you! you!" he cried. "Get out of the way, dog!"

With a surge of his powerful arms, the bullwhacker sent the crowd swaying to the right and left. The next instant, he took one long step forward and delivered a swing blow that caught Yellow Jack fairly between the eyes.

The Spaniard measured his length on the floor.

CHAPTER XII.

SOME STARTLING EXPOSURES.

"WOOSH!" cried the black-whiskered man, flourishing his clinched fists in the air. "I'm a shudderin' horror w'en I'm started. One blow means sickness, two blows means death!"

Yellow Jack did not offer to arise.

He was fairly knocked senseless!

"Humpin' Jehosaphat!" gasped a spectator. "I'd rather be hit by chain-lightnin' than one of that feller's mauls!"

It happened that the cowboys from Rainbow Ranch were in another part of the room, and they knew nothing of the trouble until Jack was dragged out and stretched on a billiard table. Then they excitedly demanded to know what had happened. They were told the exact truth, and Yellow Jack received very little sympathy from them, although they were inclined to think it a disgrace that one of their party should be knocked out at a single blow. In fact, the Spaniard was not popular among his own mates.

When Jack recovered consciousness, he swore he would have the bullwhacker's life. However, the offender was not to be found, and the Spaniard again sought a place at the gambling table.

The masked boy's luck had turned and he was losing steadily. Still he remained cool and easy, as if not in the least concerned how fortune used him.

Just as Yellow Jack reached the table, another sport entered the game. He was a rather fine-looking fellow, the most of his face being covered by a perfectly-trimmed brown beard. His dress was rather picturesque and flashy, and he wore a great amount of jewelry. There was not a diamond to be seen upon his person, rubies being the only stones he wore.

"It's Ruby Rob," said more than one.

Yellow Jack looked at the sport with interest. He had often heard of Ruby Rob, a strange and mysterious gambler who appeared and disappeared in a most unaccountable manner.

The sport purchased two stacks of chips and made a wager.

"It's like throwing money away," he laughed; "but a fellow must have something for excitement. Blue Nose is getting distressingly dull."

Jack found a seat between Ruby Rob and the strange boy, and he entered the game.

The boy started when he saw Jack take a

seat at his side, and then he waited for the Spaniard to place his bets. When Jack had done so, the boy bet exactly opposite.

Again the strange lad's luck changed, for he began winning once more, while Yellow Jack lost almost continuously.

Ruby Rob risked large sums, and seemed utterly indifferent whether he won or lost.

The Spaniard was annoyed by the persistency with which the boy bet opposite him. If he placed his money on red, the boy would put up an equal sum on black; if he bet on high, the boy would make a venture on low.

And the masked lad won.

"Por Dios!" grated Jack. "I am hoodooed!"

Then he looked up and saw the bullwhacker who had struck him watching the game.

For an instant the Spaniard was tempted to pull a revolver and take a snap-shot at the bullwhacker, but, knowing he would be lynched without ceremony if he made a blunder, he curbed his anger and pretended he did not see the black-whiskered man.

Something about the masked boy attracted Jack's attention, and he began watching the strange lad covertly from the corners of his eyes. It was not long before he fancied he had made a discovery.

"Why does the young senor always bet opposite me?" Jack finally inquired, his voice being pitched at a low key, but his manner seeming offensive.

The boy turned a single look on him and then calmly counted his chips, placing them in little stacks, and making no reply to the question.

Yellow Jack flushed hotly.

"Why doesn't senor answer my question?" he demanded.

Ruby Rob leaned forward and tapped the Spaniard lightly on the sleeve.

"The kid has a right to place his bets as he sees fit," said the mysterious sport.

"Senor," came haughtily from Jack's lips, "I was not addressing you!"

"That's all right," laughed Ruby Rob. "I took a fancy to shoot a little mouth at you. Do you mean to remain in the game?"

"Perhaps."

"Oh, all right. If you thought of getting out, I was going to suggest you did so at once, allowing a waiting friend of mine to have that chair."

"Will you tell me why you persist in betting opposite me?" the Spaniard asked, once more turning on the boy.

The masked lad shook his head, but did not speak.

"I consider it an insult, senor!"

Still the mask was silent.

"Will you show me your face?"

Another shake of the head.

"I demand it!"

A still more emphatic shake.

"I will see it!"

With that he snatched the mask from the face it had concealed.

A cry of surprise arose.

The face of a beautiful girl was revealed! And that girl was—

Julia Ruthven!

The black-whiskered bullwhacker seemed more astonished than any one.

"I thought as much!" triumphantly exclaimed Yellow Jack.

"You cowardly dog!" grated Ruby Rob, his fingers closing on the Spaniard's throat. "I will choke the life out of your miserable body!"

But Jack was not so easily conquered. He turned on the sport with the fury of a tiger.

A savage struggle ensued, the two men going to the floor.

"Make room! make room!"

The crowd fell back a bit, giving the two plenty of space to struggle in.

"Let them settle it! Don't touch them!"

Suddenly, the Spaniard arose upon the other's breast, uplifting his right hand, in which glittered the keen blade of a slender knife. He intended to drive the wicked weapon into the gambler's throat, but his wrist was caught in an iron grip, and Ruby Rob's life was spared.

It was the black-whiskered bushwhacker who had saved the card-sharp.

In another moment, Ruby Rob had struggled up and the battle was renewed.

In the midst of it, the Spaniard's fingers closed in the gambler's beard, which, to the surprise of all, came off. The beard was false, and the face exposed was recognized by several.

"Red Dan, the Rustler!"

The sport was indeed the chief of the outlaws. Finding his identity exposed, the Rustler tore himself from Yellow Jack's grasp and sought to escape from the room.

"Stop him!" roared Big Ben, forcing his way forward. "He's my game!"

"Yours to catch," half-laughed the outlaw, as he leaped to the top of the gambling table. And then he sprung out and seemed to skim over the heads of the crowd.

"He's making for a window!" howled someone, as Red Dan landed on the floor and continued his rush for liberty.

The only thing that could stop him now was a bullet.

Crack!

The outlaw was at the window when the weapon spoke. In another moment he would have leaped through and escaped, but he was stopped by a bullet. Flinging up his arms, he sunk limply to the floor.

There was a moment's hush following the fall of the Rustler chief, and then one wild yell of triumph went up. Red Dan had long troubled that section, but now he was down.

The crowd rushed toward the fallen man, Big Ben leading.

But the black-whiskered bushwhacker was there first.

Planting a foot on either side of the unlucky outlaw, he flashed a pair of heavy revolvers from some hidden pocket, thrusting the muzzles of the weapons almost against Big Ben's forehead, as he shouted:

"Back! The man who puts a hand on him dies in his tracks!"

That stopped the rush, and the mob halted, staring in astonishment at the lone man who dared them all.

"Who are you?" the astounded foreman of Rainbow Ranch finally asked.

"Don't you know me?"

"No."

Without dropping either revolver, he lifted a hand and removed the false beard he wore, almost instantly turning the revolver on the crowd again.

"Now you know me, Ben Jordan!"

The men from Rainbow Ranch uttered cries of amazement.

"It's Silver Spur Steve!" they shouted.

CHAPTER XIII.

RED DAN MAKES HIS BOW.

AND Steve it really was!

"Howlin' blizzards!" gasped Bud Rogers. "W'at'll ther next critter turn out ter be?"

"Steve?" cried Big Ben. "Is it really ther boy?"

The Ranch Mascot smiled at the astonishment his unmasking had created.

"You're surprised, pards."

"Wa-al, jest a leetle!"

"Caramba!" snarled Yellow Jack, edging to the front. "Now he shows his hand! I have a blow against him, and he shall pay for it!"

"If you know when your health is well off, you will keep at a proper distance," declared the outcast from Rainbow Ranch, turning one of the revolvers on the Spaniard. "I have no particular love for you."

"Love is not wasted between us, senor!"

"I trust not."

"But w'at's ther meanin' of this?" asked the huge foreman. "W'at you defendin' that cuss fer?"

"I have the best of reasons."

"This makes things look powerful bad ag'in' ye, boy. I did hev a little hope you'd pull out of t'other scrape, but this settles it."

"I suppose that now, without further argument, you will adjudge me guilty of the charge against me?"

"You shall have a show."

"Very well. In four days more I will return to stand my trial."

"You will return now."

"You mean—"

"That you are going back to Rainbow Ranch with us—just that."

"Are you sure?"

"Dead sure."

"Dead sure things sometimes fail to work. However, I will give myself up, if you will allow the friends of this unfortunate man to take him away."

"We'll make no such bargain. If he is dead—"

"He is not."

Steve had seen Red Dan open his eyes and look up at him in a wondering manner, and he knew the outlaw chief was far from being dead. If this man was his father, he was in duty bound to do all he could to save him from the mob.

"Waal," said Big Ben, "all I got ter say is

it's ther wu'st fer him not bein' dead. He'd be in great luck ef he was planted six feet under ther daisies."

"I hold the drop, and I will defend him to the end, so far as this mob is concerned."

"The more fool you!"

"Perhaps so, but that does not cut any figure. I am not going to see him lynched."

"What is he ter you?"

"That question I refuse to answer."

"What's all this chin about?" broke in a citizen of Blue Nose. "The man we want is Red Dan, and he's the man we're going to have. No boy with a brace of guns can stop us. You're only making a fool of yourself by trying it, young fellow."

"Now you're talking through your hat," calmly returned Steve. "You don't know whether I am making a fool of myself or not. I may be a match for this whole gang, for all you can tell."

"Bosh!"

"Very well, wade in and take Red Dan. I promise you I will create a certain amount of interest in the job."

"For the last time, will you give him up?"

"For the last time, not to this mob. Bring the proper official and let him guarantee me Red Dan shall be protected from Judge Lynch, and I will step aside. I am not flinging myself in the track of the law; I am simply defying lawlessness."

"That's all Tommy-rot!"

"It may be, but it goes."

"Steve," said Big Ben, soberly, "we're goin' to take that critter. You had best fling up ther sponge an' let things hev their run. Ef ye don't, you'll git most mightily hurt."

"Nary fling, Ben."

"We're comin'!"

"Then look out for bullets!"

But, at this point, a dozen masked faces appeared at the windows and as many rifle-barrels were thrust into the saloon.

"Hold hard, therel" cried a ringing voice. "We have the drop on that mob, and we can wipe it out in less than a minute!"

Red Dan suddenly sat up, wiping some blood from the side of his face and smiling serenely.

"Those are my boys," he announced. "They are on hand, like a glove. Now, gents, if you want mereal bad, just sail right in and take me. I'm like a ripe plum—ready to be plucked."

But the tables were turned, and the mob knew it. Red Dan held the winning cards.

The outlaw arose to his feet, appearing a bit unsteady, as if somewhat dazed by his wound, but all the while cool and deliberate.

"This is proving to be a large-sized night," he observed. "I was looking for a little excitement—and I found it. Some cuss came near winding up my worsted, just as hard," significantly touching the bloody side of his head.

"It's a derned pity he didn't!" growled a voice from the center of the mob.

Red Dan laughed.

"You may think so, but I can't agree with you. As he failed, I think I will be getting out. I would be pleased if I had more time to spend with you, but business calls. I have an engagement to cut out a big herd of cattle before morning, and so I must leave you."

"Come, boy, we will go."

"I beg your pardon," said Steve, coldly. "You may go. I remain here."

The Rustler was surprised.

"Not much you don't!" he cried. "These whelps would swing you, after what you have done for me!"

"Let 'em swing. I only prevented the mob from doing you up. Had there been an officer handy, I would have turned you over to him. You should understand why I kept them from lynching you."

"Oh, they would not have gone very far with their lynching, for my boys would have come down on them before they could finish the job. All the same, you kept them off me, and I appreciate it. I'm not going to leave you to be chewed up by this lot of snarling wolves."

"Many thanks; but I really prefer being left."

"That does not make any difference. You are going along with me."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain."

"If I refuse—"

"You will be taken."

"Then you will have to take me."

Red Dan made a signal, and a coil of rope shot through one of the open windows. A noose settled over Steve's shoulders, and then the young cattleman was snatched toward the window. In another moment he was dragged outside.

"That closes the performance," bowed Red Dan, after which he, too, leaped out through the window and disappeared. Immediately the rifles vanished from the windows, and the Rustlers were gone.

The mob within the saloon looked dazed, staring from one to the other. Finally Big Ben exclaimed, in the greatest disgust:

"We're a pretty pack of birds! Hyar we hed Red Dan and Steve Norman in our fingers an' they hev slipped us! Oh, I feel like hiring a mule to kick me!"

Yellow Jack frothed with fury.

Suddenly, the entire mob dashed out into the street. They were in time to hear the clatter of hoofs far down the street, and then to their ears came the sound of a wild rollicking song from the throats of the retreating Rustlers.

That was enough to make Blue Nose rise up on its hind legs and howl, figuratively speaking. The entire town was seething.

In the midst of all this excitement, Big Ben thought of Julia Ruthven, who had been playing the role of a mysterious masked boy. The giant foreman rushed back into the Sunset Saloon and searched for her.

She had vanished, and no one knew anything about her. It seemed that she disappeared immediately after being exposed in her true character.

The events of that night were enough to furnish material for gossip in Blue Nose for some time to come. True, no one had been killed, but Red Dan had visited the town with his men at his back for the first time in two years. Now that his disguise as Ruby Rob was exposed, they knew he had visited them at other times, but never with his entire band within call.

The most chagrined men in Blue Nose were the cowboys from Rainbow Ranch.

"It's a howlin' shame!" growled Bud Rogers. "Thar we hed Steve Norman an' Red Dan right in our fingers!"

"Don't speak of it!" sighed Jim Grant. "It gives me great pain!"

"But ther gal!" put in the foreman. "I can't understand w'at she was up ter."

"Whar has she gone?"

"Thet's ter find out."

"Waal, she hain't dead so much as we reckoned she was."

"Not any dead."

They talked the matter over, finally deciding they could do nothing more than return to the ranch.

"We'll git guyed," said one.

"Ther galoot who tries it'll be taken with a fit of sickness," declared Big Ben. "I hain't in no humor ter take any guyin' 'bout this biz."

They gathered up their horses and rode out of town, leaving the aroused citizens holding an indignation meeting in the principal hotel.

"They'll offer a little reward for ther capture of Red Dan, an' thet's all it'll 'mount to," said Big Ben.

CHAPTER XIV.

JULIA STRIKES.

IN retreating from Blue Nose, the Rustlers carried Cowboy Steve with them. He did not go along willingly, and, finding that he was liable to give them the slip, Red Dan ordered him to be bound to his horse.

"It's only right and proper that a boy should obey his dad," chuckled the outlaw. "I haven't had a very good chance to train you in the past, and I mean to improve the present opportunity."

"And make me regret I saved you from the mob," retorted Steve, bitterly.

"Not at all. I am only doing what I consider for your own good, my son."

"I am old enough to know what is for my own good."

"Oh, well, we won't quarrel about it."

Away into the night rode the Rustlers, Cowboy Steve in their midst. Red Dan had not been at all seriously wounded in the saloon, only being stunned for a moment, and he was in good spirits.

A long ride through the night followed. At length, they halted and a brief consultation followed. Then Steve was carefully blindfolded.

"A precaution at which I trust you will take no offense," softly purred Red Dan.

The helpless Mascot did not reply.

They went forward again, and he soon realized they were passing deep into an underground passage.

At length they halted, and the bandage was removed from the captive's eyes, after which he was pulled from the horse, being held upon his feet by strong hands.

"Here we are, pard," declared a rough voice. "Right sight up, with care. Just keep your level, now."

"Many thanks for your advice," retorted Steve, cheerfully. "We may be here, but I would like to ask where here is?"

"You'll hev ter ask somebody as has ther right to answer," assured his companion.

Lights were moving on either hand, and voices were calling to each other. Horses were being led across the cavern floor.

Steve looked around, his hands being secured behind him, wondering what they would do with him next.

"If my hands were only free and I had my barkers!" he muttered. "Great Moses! but I would make it lively about here! I do not fancy this kind of treatment, and I propose to show my resentment at the first opportunity."

He was not left alone long. A slouching figure approached, and a rasping voice invited him to "foller." As there was nothing else to do, he followed the man with the rasping voice.

Steve was conducted to a lighted chamber, in which there was some rude furniture, and then he was left alone, being advised to "take things easy."

Left to his own reflections, he thought over all that had occurred, soon coming to the conclusion that he had made a fool of himself.

"My stand for Red Dan will count against me," he muttered. "They will believe I have joined the Rustlers. That will settle it in their minds that I wiped out poor Dick Clark. It was on the impulse of the moment that I kept the mob from jumping Red Dan. Just then I only remembered he was my father—or that he had brought good evidence to that effect. I did not propose to buck against the law; I simply stood up against lawlessness. At the same time I was defending an outlaw."

"And what was my reward? Here I am, a helpless prisoner in Red Dan's hands. He dragged me here against my will, and— Great guns! I'm still trussed up!"

For a few moments he had almost forgotten his hands were still confined behind him, and now, when he tried to move them, he suddenly became madly enraged. Hurrying to the heavy door that had closed behind the man with the rasping voice, he tried to open it, but was not successful.

"Infernal hounds!" he grated, pacing furiously up and down the chamber. "I will yet get square for this!"

His back was turned on the door when it opened softly and a beautiful girl's face appeared. A pair of large blue eyes gazed wistfully at the manly figure of the young cowboy, and then the girl entered. Her step was so light he did not hear it until—

"Steve!"

Wheeling, he saw her standing before him.

"You here?"

A look of surprise was quickly replaced by a hardening of the face that plainly bespoke his feelings.

"Yes," she answered. "I am here."

"Where you belong?"

"Why?"

"You are among rascals and thieves."

She put out her shapely hands in appeal.

"Oh, Steve! you are so cruel!"

"Because I know you so well. Where is Bartley Frick?"

The question seemed to take her breath for a moment, but she hastily recovered.

"How should I know?"

"You should know, if any one. You deserted me for that whelp."

"Which I shall never cease to regret."

"I trust you speak the truth—for once."

"I do—I do!"

"But I doubt it."

"Why should you doubt me?" she panted, growing excited beneath his withering scorn.

"What right have you to speak like this to me? You did not doubt me in the old days; why should you now?"

"Why shouldn't I? I have every reason for doubting. What is the use of discussing this matter! I have tried to forget it all, but you continue to trouble me with your presence. If you would keep away—"

"I won't!"

He drew a deep breath and sat down on one of the chairs.

"Oh, very well," he said. "By the way, how is Frick doing at his new business?"

"Frick?"

"Your lover."

She winced.

"I do not understand you."

"I am sure it is plain enough."

"It may be. You ask what he is doing in his new business. To what business do you refer?"

"Stealing cattle."

"You are not nearly as sharp as you think. You believe—"

"I merely supposed him one of the gang. That explained your presence."

"You are wrong."

"So?"

"Yes. Bartley Frick is not one of Red Dan's men."

"Red Dan is to be congratulated."

She came close, standing before him.

"Steve," she said, slowly, "Frick threw me over."

He lifted his eyebrows.

"Really?"

"It is true."

"Well, the fellow did have some sense."

That sent her back a step, her hands clinched convulsively, a sudden light of fury leaping into those blue eyes. Her red lips were parted and pulled back hard against the white teeth, making her appear for a moment like an enraged cat.

He smiled calmly at the picture she presented, as if he rather enjoyed it.

Turning, she paced up and down the chamber, trembling with suppressed emotion.

At length, she came and stood before him again.

"You do not seem at all like the Steve Norman I knew in the old days," she declared.

"We grow sensible as we grow older."

"You have grown hard and heartless."

"In the old days, I was soft."

"You had some feeling."

"I have still for any one or anything that deserves it. If you are hurt by my manner, for heaven's sake keep away from me! That is all I ask. I am sure I do not crave your society. Why do you force it upon me?"

"Because I love you!"

"You cannot expect to win a man's love in such a way. And you are mad to dream that I could ever care for you again. All the old regard is dead—forever dead. I told you this once before, and I tell you again. I sincerely hope this will be enough."

She was silent for some time, but she spoke again, at length her voice faltering somewhat:

"This destroys my last hope! When I heard the band had brought you in with them, my heart leaped. Now it lies like a stone in my bosom!"

"Then you reached this place ahead of the band? You must have made good time. The last I saw of you, you were in the Sunset Saloon at Blue Nose."

"I lost no time in getting here, after my exposure in the saloon."

"Why were you there, playing such a part?"

"I went there, disguised, to look for you. You know my passion for gambling. I did not find you, and, to while away the time, I drifted into the game. That is all."

"Quite enough! And you have thought I could care for a creature of so many vices! Julia, you were foolish!"

"You cared for me once."

"I do not deny it—why should I? That goes for nothing. What do your friends, the Rustlers, propose to do with me?"

"Red Dan means to save you from being lynched," she said, breathing heavily. "You have scorned me for the last time. If you will not have my love, then you shall take my knife! This time I will not fail!"

Like a flash she grasped his throat with her left hand, the right being upraised and holding a glittering blade.

Then she struck straight at his heart!

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER BOND.

WITH his hands tied behind him, scarcely expecting such a mad attempt on his life, the young cowboy seemed doomed.

No effort of his own could have saved him.

But Julia had left the chamber door open and a third person entered. This person was close at hand when she struck at Silver Spur Steve's heart.

"Hold hard, my beauty!"

The girl's hand was caught just in time. Iron fingers closed on her wrist, and the blow was arrested just as the point of the slender dagger touched the breast of the helpless Mascot.

"This is a dangerous toy for you to have," declared Red Dan, as he wrenched the knife from Julia's fingers. "Lucky I was on hand."

She gave a shrill scream of baffled fury and tried to get possession of the dagger once more.

"Let me have it! let me have it!" she panted.

"What for, dear?" coolly asked the outlaw.

"You might cut yourself."

"When he lay dead at my feet, I meant to take my own life."

"The more fool you!" said Red Dan, with sudden sternness. "I did fancy you had some sense, but it seems I was mistaken. Do you suppose I would have let you come in here with him if I had known your little game? You lied to me; you said you loved him."

"It was true!"

"Well, I let you come for a purpose. Didn't I tell you your love was folly?"

"Yes."

"I could have told you more, but I wished to know if he loved you in return. In that case, I had a little revelation to make. I happened to be at hand in time to discover he cares nothing for you. This being the case, it is not necessary to make the revelation."

Cowboy Steve arose from the chair.

"I suppose I have to thank you for saving my life," he began.

Only to be quickly interrupted by the Rustler chief:

"It even us up, my boy; you saved me from the mob."

A sudden suspicion assailed the young cowboy.

"And did you put up this little piece of business that you might seem to square the debt?" he quickly asked.

Red Dan flushed. He was not an unhandsome man, and he actually looked hurt by Steve's insinuation.

"Do you actually think that of me?" he asked.

In a moment the younger man saw he was wrong, and he promptly acknowledged it.

"No, I do not think so," he said. "I can see I was mistaken. But, it was strange you should leave me here with my hands tied behind me."

"I did not leave you so—don't accuse me of that. It was one of my men. I gave orders that you should be cut free. Here, let me get at your hands."

With the keen knife he had snatched from the grasp of the enraged girl, he set Steve free.

"Thanks; it is a great relief," declared the cowboy, as he rubbed his wrists.

The girl sunk down on a couch, where she sat, her face buried in her hands, now and then shuddering convulsively. Red Dan looked at her, and there was something like a pitying light in his eyes, although he spoke a trifle harshly:

"Come, come, Julie! don't make a blooming fool of yourself! There are plenty more. Even if there were not, you might console yourself, for I'll tell you now it is impossible for you two to ever be more to each other than you are at this moment."

She lifted her eyes and looked at him wonderingly.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said; so let it drop at that."

But she sprang up, crying:

"You must explain!"

A strange smile crossed his face.

"You seem to forget I am monarch here," came quietly from his lips. "I am the only person who can use the word *must*. Keep cool, Julie!"

With a fierce gesture, she began pacing up and down the chamber.

Red Dan watched her a moment, then turned to Steve.

"Queer things, a woman's nerves," he commented.

The cowboy smiled, but asked:

"Why did you bring me here? You knew I did not wish to come."

"If I remember correctly, I told you once—to keep you from falling into the hands of the mob from Rainbow Ranch. They were in Blue Nose to look after you. That's how I happened to be there, too. I knew they were coming, for my spy at the ranch warned me of it."

Steve started.

"Then you have a spy at Rainbow?"

"Yes."

"But you asked me to act as your spy, a few days ago."

"Because I wished to make a change. I fancied my man was suspected, and I meant to withdraw him before anything was proved against him. See?"

"I do. Who is he?"

Red Dan laughed and shook his head.

"Oh, no; I'm not telling even you. You have odd ideas in your head, my boy, and you might

think it your duty to inform on him. In fact, I believe you would."

"You are right; I should certainly tell Warren Milton. As it is, if I have the opportunity, I shall tell him there is a spy among his men."

"That will do no harm, for my spy leaves to-night. I have considered it best to withdraw him. To-morrow, a man will be missing from Rainbow Ranch; that man is the spy."

"What do you mean to do with me?"

"Oh, I don't know. Not much of anything."

"Am I to be set free?"

"Yes, to-morrow."

"That information is pleasant."

"You are to be set free on condition."

"Ah! And what is the condition?"

"That you do not return to Rainbow Ranch."

"What, not at all?"

"Exactly."

"Then I am afraid I shall not obtain my liberty to-morrow."

"You will not give such a promise?"

"No, I will not!"

"Will you promise not to return there until the end of the ten days?"

"What ten days?"

"Didn't you agree to remain away that length of time?"

"I did, but I scarcely understand why it should make any difference to you whether I keep my promise or not."

"Have you forgotten I proved you are my son?"

"No, I have not forgotten."

"It is only natural I should wish to preserve the life of my only son."

The girl, who had been walking up and down the chamber, turned like a flash at these words.

"What's that?" she cried.

Red Dan looked disgusted.

"Hang my blundering tongue!" he muttered.

Julia rushed upon him, catching his arm.

"What do you mean?" she wildly demanded.

"Did I hear correctly? Did you call him your son?"

"Now don't get excited," advised the chief.

"You have had tantrums enough for a while."

"Tell me the truth!" she almost screamed.

"If you expect to get anything out of me, you will have to be calm."

By a mighty effort, she regained control of her sorely-shaken nerves.

"I am calm," she said.

Red Dan hesitated.

"It can do no good to tell you," he said.

"But I will know."

"Well, then, this young man whom you have fancied you loved so madly is my son."

"Impossible!"

"Why so?"

"If it is true, he—he is—"

"Your half-brother, exactly!"

Now it was Steve's turn to be interested.

"What is this you are saying?" he demanded, his face turning pale. "Great Heaven! it cannot be true!"

"It is true," assured Red Dan, calmly.

"Julia is my daughter by my first wife, who died at her birth. She is four years older than you. Your mother never knew I had been married before, for she never saw Julia."

The girl stood like one stunned, her face pale as marble, a wild light in her blue eyes. Her lips moved, but no words were uttered.

As for Steve, his strength seemed to leave him, and he suddenly sat down.

"What's the use to take it like this?" half-laughed the chief of the Rustlers. "You should be delighted by the discovery."

"I will not believe it!" the cowboy hoarsely declared. "You must prove it is true!"

"What proof do you ask? Have I not satisfied you that you are my son?"

"You have not satisfied me she is your daughter."

"Is that the point? She has known me as her father for many long years. I have supported her and treated her as a father treats a favorite child. I have kept her at school, and—"

"Supported her!" exclaimed Steve, rising. "Why, when I first met her, she was working blackmailing schemes in New York!"

"And I was at work for the State in Sing Sing. That explains why I did not happen to be supporting her at that particular time. Thrown on her own resources, she was forced to do something in order to live. Oh, I can bring you all the evidence you desire. I will convince you beyond the shadow of a doubt she is my daughter. Why should you two look so downcast over it? Brace up and kiss each other as brother and sister should. Hal hal hal!"

He laughed alone; there were two who failed to see where the joke came in.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MASCOT RETURNS.

THE tenth day had arrived, and Steve Norman had not yet returned to Rainbow Ranch. Not a few of the cowboys were outspoken in their belief that he would not come at all. Iva still remained his champion, and the men took good care not to express their opinion of him in her presence.

For some reason, queer old Dr. Dirk still lingered at the ranch. The old fellow had an unpleasant way of putting in an appearance when he was least expected, and it was known he had overheard many of the unpleasant things said concerning himself. Some of the men even went so far as to say he was a sneak and a spy, as he had been detected wandering about the place at all hours of the day and night.

Still, as long as the man remained Warren Milton's guest, none of the cowboys dared raise a hand against him.

Bud Rogers had been missing for three days, having disappeared in a most unaccountable manner. All search for him had proved vain, and it was finally decided he had "skipped" for some reason.

In truth, Rogers was the spy of whom Red Dan had told Steve Norman. The two-faced rascal belonged to the Rustlers, but he was mistaken when he fancied his duplicity had been suspected. Not one of his companions dreamed he was other than he appeared, a bluff, honest herder.

Yellow Jack was restless and uneasy. He had not seemed to enjoy a minute of peace since the night of the excitement in Blue Nose. He was the most open in expressions against Silver Spur Steve.

"He will never return to be hanged," sneered the Spaniard. "He is not a fool."

Still, for some reason, a few of the cowboys looked for Steve to appear. Several of them happened to be off duty that day.

It was near noon when an old, white-bearded man came slowly along the trail from Blue Nose. His clothes were rather ragged, and his general appearance was that of a veteran bum. The cowboys who were off duty gathered in a knot and watched him curiously as he approached the ranch, speculating as to his destination.

"Hello, old pard," hailed Jim Grant.

"Hey?" exclaimed the veteran, halting suddenly and surveying them, his hand behind his ear. "Git out o' whose yard? I don't see no fence."

The man laughed at this.

"It's evident he's a bit hard of hearin'," observed Big Ben, beckoning the old man to approach.

The old fellow came forward suspiciously, fumbling beneath his ragged coat.

Observing his faltering step, one of the men exclaimed:

"By Jim! it's much as ever he stands up!"

"Who said hands up?" demanded the stranger, suddenly producing a huge revolver from beneath his coat. "I hain't loaded with wealth, but I don't perpose to be robbed o' whut leetle I've got."

This caused the cowboys to laugh again.

"He is prepared for business," chuckled one. "You're all right, old man."

"Out all night? Yap; hed ter sleep in ther grass. Ketched a cold in my head. Ther makes my hearin' a bit bad. I've been troubled some that way fer nigh ten year. Knockin' round over the country don't improve it none, but I'll never give it up so long as I kin wag."

"What's your business, pard?"

"Hey?"

"What's your business?"

The old fellow straightened himself up with evident pride.

"I'm ther oldest professional tramp in the United States," he declared. "Bin on the road fer sixty-one years."

"How old are ye?"

"Eighty-three. I'm tolerably lively on the foot yit. Hoofed it clean from Blue Nose sense yistiddy."

"You must have got a jog on you."

"No they didn't set the dog on me. Ef they hed, they'd been a dead dog. I allus go loaded fer dog out in these parts. I don't mind dogs so much, arter all. It's all in gittin' used to 'em. They've chewed hunks outer var'us parts of my antimony, an' I never hed a tetch o' hydrifoby up ter date. I do s'pose thar's dogs hed a taste o' me in nigh ev'ry State an' Turritory in ther Union."

The cattlemen were growing interested in the stranger.

"What's yer handle?" asked Big Ben.

"Hey?"

"What's yer name?"

"Game? Oh, I never play now. Uster take a hand at poker, faro, freeze-out, 'most anythin'."

"Yer name—name, name!"

"Oh-ho! Thought you asked me whut was my game? I'm an old sport, ye see," grinning and ducking his head. "My name's Harris—Humpin' Harris, sometimes called Old Hump, fer short."

"Waal, Pard Harris, you're a dandy!"

"Handy? Handy at w'ot? Don't try ter ring in any splittin' wood ur that kind o' snap on me. I may be handy, but you can't flatter me inter workin'. I swore off on workin' sixty-one year ago, an' I've bin a stranger ter it uvver sence."

"I s'pose the thought o' work rouses your wrath?"

Old Hump nearly collapsed.

"Bath!" he gasped. "Don't ax me to take a bath! Last time it rained I got caught out an' was sprinkled on afore I c'd git under kiver. I hain't bin reel well sence then. A reg'ler bath'd do fer me."

The cowboys were convulsed with laughter.

"Waal, this yere old cock is funny!" roared Jim Grant. "Pard, you make us laff."

"Dunno w'ot ye're doublin' up an' snortin' at in that way!" rather angrily snapped the old fellow. "Worter's all right in its place, an' it's place is in ther ocean."

"Hyar comes 'nother stranger!" suddenly exclaimed one of the cowboys.

All looked in the direction he indicated, and they saw a rather wretched-appearing mule approaching the ranch, bearing a man on its back. As man and beast drew nearer, they perceived the former was nearly as wretched in appearance as the old tramp whom they had been chaffing. He was dressed in a threadbare black suit, and his face was the picture of woe.

"Looks like a parson in distress," observed one of the cattlemen.

The second stranger saluted them gravely as he came up.

"The Lord is blessing us with fine weather, brothers," he said, speaking in a deep, sepulchral voice. "We would have cause to be happy if there were not such an abundance of sin in the world."

"It is a parson, sure as fate!" muttered Big Ben.

The old tramp was eying the black-clothed stranger closely, almost suspiciously, it seemed.

"Seems like I've seen him somewhere afore," he was heard to murmur, beneath his breath.

"Sin is raging, brothers, and Satan is happy," added the second stranger, as he slowly dismounted from the weary-appearing mule. "I am battling against Satan, and I must confess he is giving me about all I want to do. The field is broad and the laborers are few. The harvest of tares is sure to be far in abundance over that of wheat. Is it not a sorrowful thing to contemplate?"

"He's cracked," whispered one to another, and the word was passed around.

"Whut's he talkin' about?" asked Old Hump, curiously. "I don't see ter ketch all he says."

"This poor old brother's hearing must be affected," observed the parson. "It's plain he cannot hear well."

"Whut's that 'bout bein' near hell?" asked the professional tramp, pushing forward and confronting the sorrowful-looking man. "I don't even 'low a minister to tell me that, b'gar! You'd best take it back."

Old Hump looked as if he really intended to fight, and the other seemed alarmed.

"I mean no offense," he protested.

"Throw me over the fence!" almost shouted Hump. "You never saw the day you c'd do it! I know I'm purty old, but I've got a leetle ginger left. Ef you think you kin throw me, jest sail right in!"

"Oh, I assure you, brother, I said nothing of the sort. I do not wish trouble. I am peaceable man—a servant of the Lord!"

"Waal, don't git so skeered. I thought you was sassin' me. I hain't goin' ter jump on ye, ef you don't scrap. At ther same time, if ever you feel like havin' a round, jest stomp on me coat-tail. I uster be known as ther tramp puglist. I'm a slugger from early days, an' I've got a record long as your arm."

All this seemed very laughable to the cowboys, and they enjoyed it heartily, some being inclined to urge the two men on until they were worked up to the fighting point. Big Ben, however, objected to this.

Yellow Jack had kept in the background, saying nothing. He now came forward, growling:

"Well, senors, are you satisfied Steve Nor-

man will not return? Two have come, but still he is not here."

"Oh, waal, thar's some time afore sunset," said one of the cattlemen.

"Still he will not come," sneered Jack. "He is a cowardly dog and dares not come here."

Barely had the words passed his lips when the old tramp wheeled on him like a cat. Out shot the old fellow's fist, striking the Spaniard fairly on the point of the jaw, and Yellow Jack measured his length on the grass.

"You're a liar!" cried a ringin' voice. "Steve Norman is here!"

The tramp snatched away the false wig and beard he wore, and Silver Spur Steve stood before them!

CHAPTER XVII.

ANOTHER REVELATION.

THE Ranch Mascot had returned!

For a moment, every spectator of the sudden unmasking stood silent and speechless, and then a great yell broke from the throats of the cowboys.

"It's Steve! Yil yil yil!"

In one moment, it seemed, the feelings of the men had undergone a change. They had not expected he would appear, but, now he was there, they realized they had wronged him by imagining he would remain away.

Stunned and dazed to momentary blindness by that terrific blow, Yellow Jack slowly lifted himself to his elbow, brushing a hand across his eyes, as if to clear the mist that obstructed his vision.

Then the Spaniard saw Steve and realized what had happened. A snarl of fury broke from his lips and he wrenched out a revolver, murder gleaming in his eyes.

"Look out!"

But there was no need to warn the young cowboy; he was on the alert.

Up came Yellow Jack's hand.

Leaping forward, Cowboy Steve gave a kick that sent the revolver spinning from the fingers of the unlucky rascal.

"Go slow, man!" he commanded sternly, standing above the baffled Spaniard, his hand on the butt of a revolver. "I don't want to pull a gun on you, but, if I have to do so, I shall use it!"

Yellow Jack ground his teeth, but made no move to produce a woman.

"You shall pay dearly for that blow!" he grated.

"I am ready to settle," answered Steve.

Jack slowly arose to his feet.

"This is the man who killed Dick Clark!" he cried.

"Again I am compelled to inform you you are a liar," flashed the Mascot. "I know somebody has made the charge against me, and I am here to meet it."

"Bravo!" cried the cowboys, delightedly.

"Yes, you are here," sneered Yellow Jack.

"Why didn't you come before?"

"That is none of your business!"

"As long as ye're here now, it's all right, pard," assured Big Ben, stepping forward. "I s'pose you've come ter give yerself up?"

"Yes, Ben, just that."

"Thet's ther stuff! We'll give ye a squar' show."

"You bet! you bet!" echoed the cowboys.

"That is all I ask," gravely declared Steve, as he produced his revolvers and held them toward the foreman. "Take them, old man; I surrender."

Ben hesitated, and then he took the revolvers, saying:

"All right, Steve, boy; I'll take 'em. I hain't goin' ter inconvenience yer too mighty much, so, if you'll give yer word not ter try ter git erway, that's all's needed."

"O. K., Ben! You'll find me where you can put your hand on me when you want me."

"And that will be dead and stiff!" snarled a voice.

Then Yellow Jack darted toward the now unarmed cowboy, a knife in his fingers. The murderous-minded Spaniard struck straight at the Mascot's back.

It happened that the queer old wandering parson was the one to save Steve this time.

"Thou shalt not kill!" quoted the old fellow, as he caught Jack about the waist, tripped him, and cast him headlong to the ground.

A scream of pain broke from the Spaniard's lips and he quickly rolled over upon his back. Then it was seen that in falling he had struck upon his own knife, inflicting a terrible wound.

"Whar's that medicine sharp?" was the cry that went up.

Dr. Dirk seemed listening for the call, as he promptly appeared.

"Right on hand!" he nodded. "I have a way of being around when wanted—at least, I fancy I have such a way. What is it? Hello! Cut! Well, well! Let me examine."

He at once proceeded to examine Jack's injury in a manner that indicated he was fully what he claimed to be, a physician and surgeon.

"Pretty bad!" he commented. "I can stop the flow of blood from the exterior, but—ahem—that may be all that's required. Young man," and he gazed keenly into Jack's face while his fingers prepared a bandage, "if you have anything weighing on your mind, I advise you to get rid of it. Delays are dangerous, and—well, we don't know what may happen."

To the surprise of all, Yellow Jack replied to this with a volley of language so violent and vile that it even shocked some of the hardened cattle-men.

"You can't work me in such a way, old fool!" he snarled. "I have nothing to tell!"

Dick nodded coolly, finished binding up the wound, and then gave instructions that Jack be taken into the ranch. As they carried the wounded man in, the doctor whispered:

"Straight to the room where Dick Clark died—take him there."

They did as directed, despite the protests of the wounded wretch, who objected violently when he discovered whither they were carrying him.

The queer old parson, who said his name was Podder, followed the men into the house and made himself quite at home after he got there. In the excitement, no great amount of attention was bestowed upon him.

Dr. Dirk warmly shook Steve Norman's hand. "I knew you would come!" he cried; "that is, I thought I knew it—no, by Jove! I did know! There was no uncertainty at all about it, in this case."

Iva Milton hastened to Silver Spur, as soon as she learned he had appeared. Clinging to his hand, she said:

"I am so glad to see you once more, Steve! I told them all the time you would come back and prove your innocence. They did not believe me, but I knew you too well to doubt."

"God bless you, little one!" he murmured, somewhat huskily. "What have I ever done to deserve your confidence?"

"I read your manhood in your eyes."

"And you have never thought it possible I was guilty and would not return?"

"Never for one moment. Listen: a friend has been at work for you during these ten days, and he has not wasted his time. They will never prove you killed Dick Clark."

Warren Milton greeted the young man pleasantly.

"It really seems good to get back to the old place!" laughed Steve.

"I don't think you had better go away again," said Milton. "Rainbow Ranch cannot get along without its Mascot."

Within two hours after Steve's appearance a cowboy from a neighboring ranch came dashing up to Rainbow and called for Milton. The rancher saw the cattleman in his private office, and a secret consultation followed. Then the cowboy departed, riding like the wind to the east.

"Wonder what's in the wind," muttered Big Ben. "That's somethin' up."

The foreman was right. Within twenty minutes he was called into Milton's private office.

"Ben," said the rancher, seriously, "there's trouble coming. Red Dan is about to make us a visit."

Big Ben started.

"When?"

"To-night. I have received word from Banton that such is the case. Now we are to be prepared for him, but the most of the boys must not know he is coming. Why? Because I fear there is a spy in our midst."

"A spy?"

"Yes. Keep your eyes on this Parson Podder, but be shrewd enough not to let him suspect he is being watched. Do you understand?"

"You bet."

From that time on, the odd parson was under surveillance, although he was not aware of the fact.

Within the room where Dick Clark was murdered Yellow Jack tossed and turned on the bed. He could not remain quiet, although they told him he might bring about his own death by his twistings. His face expressed the greatest agony, and it seemed there was a look of horror deep in his eyes.

Dr. Dirk brought a basin of water to the

room. To the water he had added a few drops of some strange liquid, and he insisted on bathing Jack's face.

The wounded man was weak from his efforts and from his injury, and he could only protest feebly. The old doctor bathed his face and the yellow color came away, leaving a white unwrinkled skin beneath. The doctor also carefully removed the false mustache which the supposed Spaniard wore, and the change was something startling.

"Quite a neat little make-up," nodded the shrewd old doctor; "but I tumbled to it some time ago. There was not quite enough Spaniard to you. I fancied your complexion would not wash well."

"Curse you!" grasped the wounded wretch. "I have felt all along that you were working my ruin!"

"Look here, my man," came coldly from Dirk's lips, "I do not believe you have much longer to live. You had better make a clean breast of it."

Again was the villain seized by a fit of fury. He sat up in bed, fairly screaming forth his anger, as he shook his fist at the doctor. This only lasted a few moments, then he fell back limpy, his eyes closed and he looked like a corpse.

"I guess that will fix him," muttered the doctor, as he proceeded to apply restoratives.

The wounded man opened his eyes in a few moments and gazed wildly around. There was an insane glare in his dilated orbs.

"It's Clark's room!" he gurgled, trying to get out of bed, but failing from sheer lack of strength. "This is his bed! Ah! God! I can't stay here! Take me away! take me away!"

"Send Steve Norman and two or three others here," commanded the doctor, speaking to a cowboy who thrust his head in at the door just then. "Tell them to be lively about it!"

The cowboy disappeared.

"Steve Norman!" panted the man on the bed. "Don't have him come here! I—I can't see him! I have hated him, and now—now he's coming to see me die!"

"Make a clean breast of it," again advised the doctor.

Cowboy Steve soon appeared. The wounded man was lying panting and gasping on the bed, but he started when the Mascot entered. Steve also started, giving a cry of astonishment.

"Bartley Frick!"

"Yes, I am Bartley Frick," confessed the dying wretch. "I am the one who induced Julia to leave you to die. Why didn't you die? You had no right to live! Now I'm dying—dying in this bed! Take me out of it—take me out!"

"You have only a few moments more," solemnly warned Dr. Dirk.

Once more the wild glare entered the eyes of the sinking man. He started up, gazing at the bedclothes.

"Why didn't they wash off the blood?" he screamed, his disordered fancy picturing red stains all over the clothes. "It's his blood—Clark's! He died here! Ha! There he is! See how he glares at me! I killed him! I killed him! I dipped his finger in the blood and made him write the word 'Steve'! Don't touch me, Dick—don't touch me with your red hands! Take him away! He is laughing at me! Ah! His hands are on my throat! He's choking me—choking—chok—"

He fell back once more.

The end had come; but brave Steve Norman was freed from the least shadow of guilt.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LAST REVELATION.

THERE was a great hush in the chamber of death.

At this moment a sudden commotion, cries, and the sound of a pistol-shot came up from the open air.

Then Big Ben's voice was heard to cry:

"I plunked the critter dead-center that time!"

From the chamber the cowboys hurried down the stairs, Steve with them. When they reached the open air, they found the big foreman bending over a prostrate form, that of the wandering parson, while others were gathered around.

"What's this?" demanded Warren Milton, issuing from the house.

"The critter tried to git away arter I yanked off his false whiskers," explained Ben, "an' I socked it to him fer keeps. Reckon I've cooked his goose, though I didn't really mean ter do that bad. I wuz jest goin' ter bring him up with a round turn."

"You brought me up with a round bullet," said a faint voice, and the parson lifted his head.

"Red Dan!" chorused the crowd.

"Here," retorted the Rustler. "I reckon it's the last roll-call for me."

"My father!" cried Steve, stepping forward. Something like a grim smile crossed the face of the prostrate man.

"My boy," he said, "I used to have the reputation of being the slickest liar in seventeen States. I haven't recovered from lying yet. I wished to work you a trifle, and so I took a fancy to play that gag on you. I am no more your father than the man in the moon."

"For which I am duly thankful."

"Without a doubt. Look here; I've got a bullet through me right where it's going to wind up my worsted. What's the use of playing coked longer? Your father's name is Fenton Blair."

"I thought that was your name?"

"I claimed it. Instead of that, Fenton Blair was the man whose wife I made believe he was false to her—your own mother. She fled from him. He followed me and tried to wipe me out, but I was too soon for him, and he died in the hospital from the effects of the wound I gave him."

"You are mistaken, John Jayne," said a calm voice, and Dr. Dirk stepped forward. "Fenton Blair did not die, and he has been tracing you all these long years, you heartless villain. He has found you at last!"

It was the doctor's turn to remove a disguise, the spectacles and a beard.

"May I be hanged!" cried the Rustler chief.

"You may, if you live long enough," grimly replied Fenton Blair. "Allow me to see if that wound can't be plugged so you can enjoy the privilege of swinging. It would give me great satisfaction to see you hang."

"I haven't a doubt of it," confessed Red Dan, serenely, as he permitted the man he had wronged to examine the wound. "I suppose I might feel that way myself, were I in your place."

"Well, there is very little chance for you," asserted Blair, when he had thoroughly examined the injury of the other. "I'll do my best for you, though."

He dressed the wound temporarily, and then the chief of the famous outlaws was lifted and carried into the house. He seemed to take things with remarkable coolness, even though he knew there was no chance for him to recover.

"I've got to go," he said, "and I don't think I'll make any fuss over it."

When they had made him as comfortable as possible, he said:

"I discovered you had dropped to my plan of making a raid to-night, and that was why I attempted to get away. I wanted to warn the boys that the raid was no go. I knew I was watched, but I fancied I would be able to make a go of it. Instead, I slipped up."

He then made a full and free confession, clearing away all doubts in Steve's mind, and convincing him the man he had known as "Dr. Dirk" was his true father.

"This seems to straighten things out wonderfully," said Warren Milton, satisfaction expressed on his face. "Everything is terminating most agreeably."

Little Iva was the most rejoiced.

"Oh, Steve! Steve!" she laughed; "isn't it fortunate for you? There's not a man about the place now who does not look on you as a hero! Oh, I just knew how it would be! And to think that dear, funny old doctor should prove to be your father! He worked hard to save you from the charge against you, and he was satisfied Yellow Jack did the terrible work."

Steve's voice trembled a little as he thanked her again for her unswerving faith in him.

"Now you will stay here and bring good-luck to Rainbow Ranch, won't you?" she cried.

He shook his head.

"It is impossible," he answered.

Her face was instantly shadowed.

"Why, Steve!" she pleaded; "I supposed you would surely stay! Do you mean to go away and leave—and leave—us?"

"I must," was his husky assertion.

"Well, I won't have it! If you go, I'll just die of lonesomeness!"

"But I cannot stay. I would were it possible, but I should surely forget my position and do or say something rash. I am still nothing but a cowboy."

"That's all fudge! What's the matter with you? Nobody but yourself thinks such foolish things! Say, Steve!" coily.

"Iva."

"Don't you like me well enough to stay where I am?"

"That's the trouble," he answered, with sudden determination; "I like you too well."

"That's funny! I don't understand it. If you like me so much, you ought to stay all the more."

"Iva, I love you! That is why I am going away. Your father stands between us."

She clasped his hand with both her own.

"Steve!" she whispered, her lips uplifted to his.

"What, Iva?"

"Do you love me real hard?"

"You are dearer to me than all the world!"

"Then kiss me once for luck!"

He could not resist the impulse, and he suddenly caught her in his arms, covering her lips with kisses. In a moment she released herself, looking around.

"It's all right, Steve!" she said. "He's gone."

"Who?"

"Father. He was watching us."

"When?"

"Just now. He saw you kiss me, and he never made any fuss about it. Instead of that, he dusted. I reckon you'll stay now."

He stayed.

Red Dan, whose true name was John Jayne, died as he had lived, cool to the last.

The Rustlers did not make a raid on Rainbow Ranch that night, and they were soon broken up and disorganized, the death of their leader being too much for them to withstand.

Julia Ruthven, or Jayne, disappeared and was never again seen in those parts.

Fenton Blair resumed his old profession in a prosperous Western city, while Cowboy Steve, Raymond Blair, married Iva and remained on Rainbow Ranch.

He is still known as "The Mascot," and there are three little "mascots" running about the ranch now.

THE END.

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